

Genre Frictions and Narrative Passivity: The Deconstruction and Reinforcement of Structural Violence in Environmental Justice Literature

Mary Sawyer and Dr. Rebecca McWilliams Ojala Ballard, Department of English

FSU | FLORIDA STATE
UNIVERSITY

FSU
UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH
OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM
CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

The manuscript on which I worked, *Genre Frictions*, builds on research regarding how activists and writers contributed the environmental justice and health justice movements as they developed in the late 20th century.

Previous research the role of this literature in the 1990s American environmental justice movement, but *Genre Frictions* also investigates how the form and content of narration in the novels, and specifically their use of genre, shape their representation of the causal mechanisms of systemic environmental and health disparity and thereby mobilize political will against injustice.

Systemic health injustice continues to pervade contemporary society in manners which often elude common understandings of causality—for example, with the mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. **This research is relevant to understanding how literary narratives can shape political discourse, allowing us to bridge the apparent gap between interacting with art and literature and our status as political subjects.**

As a research assistant, my tasks to first help edit and prepare a manuscript for publication, and then pursue independent, guided research beginning with an inquiry related to the subject of the manuscript chapter I prepared. My work editing the manuscript provided me the opportunity to strengthen mechanical skills like editing and citation. It also encouraged me to hone my analytical abilities as I both recognized errors in and reformatted the text. I improved as a researcher by accessing and studying the works cited to start my independent research. Independently, I initially pursued simple line of inquiry on the narrative treatment of disability in environmental justice literature. I then focused on researching environmental justice literature from the perspective of disability studies.

Findings

As a manuscript editor, I developed the mechanical skills of editing like correcting grammar, spell-checking, adapting a text to the guideline of a publisher, and suggesting clarifying verbal or structural alteration. I learned to identify and apply the compositional techniques of forwarding, countering, and argument structure by engaging with the chapter and supplemental readings.

As an independent researcher, my investigation into the intersection of disability studies and environmental justice literature is ongoing. I have observed that environmental justice narratives often invoke the disabled body as a grotesque or pitiful spectacle to elicit reader outrage towards injustice. This framing reinforces ableist rhetorics which devalue disabled bodies, enforce a strict duality between human bodies and their environments, and rhetorically associate bodily purity and wholeness with virtue.

“Genre frictions” are used in environmental justice literature to encourage the reader to question inaction in wielders of power, commonly misunderstood causality, and environmentally and corporeally harmful societal structures to motivate them towards enacting political change. But the **failure to question the structures that create and reinforce ableism, and the promotion of a construction of the disabled body associated with spectacle, disgust, and impurity advances ableist rhetorics in environmental justice literature.**

Ozeki's 1998 novel *My Year of Meats* was one of the primary texts I read and read about in my chapter: its framing of disabilities influenced my independent research.

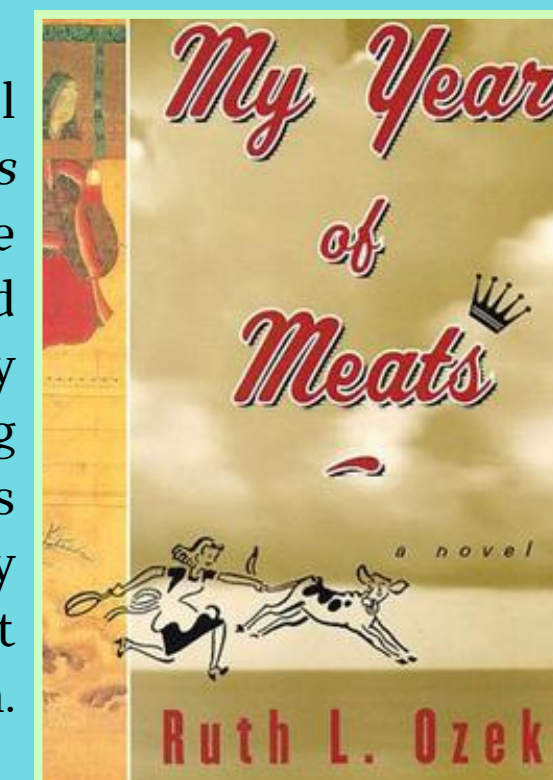
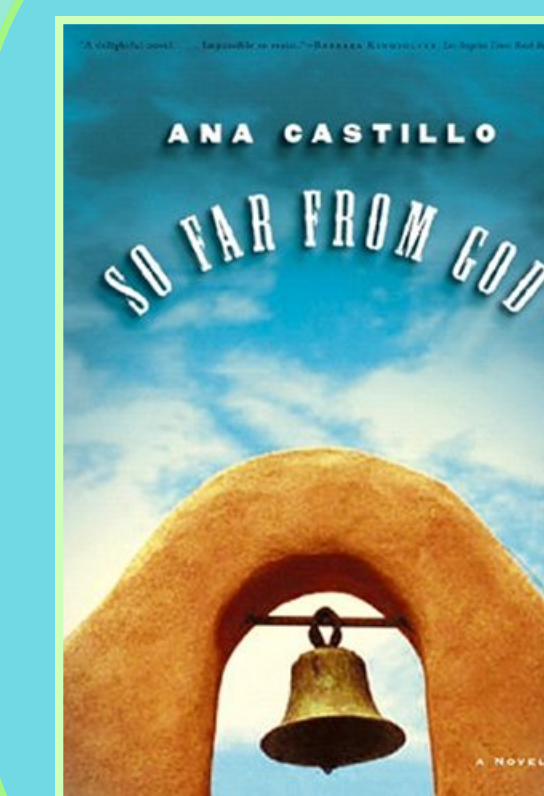


Photo credit: https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/71K0XgdSUVL_SL1381.jpg



So Far From God by Ana Castillo (1993) was discussed in the chapter as exemplifying the use of genre friction with the magical realist and naturalist genres to emphasize environmental injustice.

Photo credit: <https://bookedallweek.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/so-far-from-god.jpg>

References



Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Ballard's attentive, empathetic, and constructive guidance throughout the editing, research, and poster-making process. I must also thank my mom for encouraging me to pursue undergraduate research and generally for nurturing my ambitions.

Methods

- Dr. Ballard selected two novels of the American environmental and health justice movements as they developed in the late 20th century; these were *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki and *So Far from God* by Ana Castillo.
- Dr. Ballard reviewed literature on subjects ranging from analyses of the novels themselves, governmental treatment of the AIDS crisis and AIDS activism, the relationship between systemic racism and pollution and the anti-racism in the environmental justice movement, Chicano fiction and magical realism, American naturalist literature, and more.

Dr. Ballard wrote the chapter assigned to me as a part of a larger manuscript for the book *Genre Frictions* and made in-text and reference citations in MLA format.

- I reviewed the Notes-Bibliography form of citation in the Chicago Manual of Style and the requirements of the University of Minnesota Press Guide.
- I researched the practical application of these styles of writing, citation, and publishing by analyzing texts on literature and culture published recently by the University of Minnesota Press.
- I used both the CMS and the University's press guide to convert the rough MLA in-text citations in the chapter into notes in the Chicago style.

I then began to research independently by reading secondary literature referenced in the chapter, gradually focusing my scope.

- I read pieces of “eco-crip” theory, or critical work incorporating disability studies and the environmental justice movement.
- I focused on the intersection between these perspectives as literary criticism.
- I conducted a literature review by using databases for humanities research. I used the database for related text recommendations. I reviewed texts and authors referenced in material my mentor suggested.

Future Research

My independent research is ongoing. I want to investigate eco-crip theory as a lens of literary criticism by pursuing several related lines of inquiry:

- How have disability narratives historically been included in literature of the environmentalist and environmental justice movements?
- How do authors of environmental justice literature use disability as a metaphor for environmental destruction? What are the limitations of these narratives with regard to intersectional social justice?
- How can social justice literature can simultaneously echo systemic discrimination, and why it is thereby crucial to understand why, how, and where ableist narratives are found in environmental justice literature?
- How can, and how have authors of environmental justice literature included disability within their narratives without rhetorically reinforcing structural ableism.

I plan to write an annotated bibliography compiling the sources I used in my independent research and explaining their contribution to my work. I will also complete brief paper summarizing and discussing my tentative results by the end of the semester.

The research will underscore the critical need to incorporate numerous perspectives in political movements advancing social justice initiatives. **Evaluating the relationship between literary form and genre, discriminatory rhetorics, and political justice initiatives has the potential to encourage a materially productive collaboration between activist art and theories of intersectionality.**