Community Literacy Journal

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 5

Fall 2009

Narragansett Bay and Biospheric Literacies of the Body

Matthew Ortoleva
Matthew.Ortoleva@worcester.edu

Recommended Citation
Ortoleva, Matthew. "Narragansett Bay and Biospheric Literacies of the Body." Community Literacy Journal, vol. 4, no. 1, 2009, pp. 59–72, doi:10.25148/clj.4.1.009454.

Narragansett Bay and Biospheric Literacies of the Body

Matthew Ortoleva

As part of an on-going ethnographic study of the role language plays in the construction of ecological relationships to Narragansett Bay, the major estuary and defining feature of the State of Rhode Island, this article explores the transformational moments when body and place connect and the literate acts that result from this connection. The participants in this study share stories of profound loss, unwavering advocacy, and ecological consciousness that reflect an understanding of what it means to be part of an ecological community and advocate for healthy, just, and sustainable communities across Earth's entire biosphere. Moreover, the participants in this study demonstrate that biospheric literacies begin at the level of the body, extend outward through an understanding of the interconnectedness of living systems, and are reflected in the way we care for our own immediate ecological communities.

Recently, Paulla Dove Jennings,[1] a Narragansett elder and storyteller, explained to me that after socials and powwows the Narragansett people would go down to the bay that now carries their nation's name and immerse themselves in the water, wash their bodies, and through song and prayer give thanks to the Creator for the blessings of the Earth. "Washing in the waters of Narragansett Bay," she explained, "reminds us of our connection to the Earth and at the same time makes us strong and healthy." It is by the waters of Narragansett Bay, the major estuary and defining feature of the state of Rhode Island, where the Narragansett people have dwelled for millennia. In these same waters, Save The Bay, a professional and successful environmental advocacy organization, has held its annual swim event for the past thirty years. Every year since 1977, swimmers have used their bodies to support the sustainability efforts of Save The Bay while discovering their own personal connections to this particular ecological community by participating in an open-water swim of nearly two miles. What the Narragansett people and the professional advocates of Save The Bay recognize is that a bodily connection to place can create awareness and understanding of ecological relationships to one's biotic and abiotic community. In this essay, I explore transformative moments of intersection between body and place and how these moments lead to bodily ways of knowing a place and acts that reflect ecological consciousness and a greater biospheric literacy. I draw from an on-going qualitative research project that considers the role language plays in the construction of ecological relationships to the Narragansett Bay watershed.

Ecoethnography and the Study of Place

In order to understand how everyday literate acts are used to create, sustain, challenge, and change ecological relationships to Narragansett Bay, I have turned to an ethnographic orientation. Ethnography "proceeds from the possibility of understanding others on their own terms" (Brodkey 41). As a qualitative research method, ethnography is used to understand a process or phenomena and the meaning attached to it by human agents (Denzin and Lincoln 2). My research is informed by current theories and approaches to ethnography that have emerged in rhetoric and composition over the past two decades and are used to study literacy, discursive practices, communicative behavior, and the relationship between culture and language (Moss 156; Brown and Dobrin 3). Scholars such as Sidney Dobrin, Stephen Brown, and Christopher Keller have recognized ethnography as a critical and political approach to research, which creates diverse knowledges that are situated, historicized, partial, and socially constructed. Moreover, ethnographies are not mere objective reports but rather are a means of social action seeking to help bring about political and social change (Cushman 21). Like others from the discipline of rhetoric and composition involved in ethnography, I want to understand how behavior, experiences, and cultural attitudes manifest rhetorically and how discursive practices affect the lives of human agents from moment to moment and in everyday lived experiences (Brodkey 25; Reiff 44). My specific concern is with how such rhetorical manifestations and discursive practices help or hinder the creation of sustainable, healthy communities and impact the materiality of the natural world. As such, my study proceeds from a position of place-consciousness and ecological concern shared by myself and my participants and may be aptly called an "ecoethnography" (Brown and Dobrin 7). To study the ecological discourses of Narragansett Bay ethnographically means to be out where these discourses emerge and have an effect, to interact and talk with the people who inhabit the watershed, and to listen to their speech acts and read their writing. My research involves three primary research techniques common to ethnography: participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis (Wolcott 88). For this essay, I draw on my time spent with Paulla Dove Jennings, an esteemed Narragansett elder and curator of the Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum, and with the organization Save The Bay, particularly as it prepared and executed the 2008 annual bay swim.

Paulla Dove Jennings has witnessed much of the Narragansett's fight for respect, sovereignty, economic health, and land-rights that the tribe has waged with the State of Rhode Island since 1975, when the tribe began a fight to reclaim lands and gain federal recognition. Of course, such a fight is just part of the Narragansett's 350-year effort to fend off cultural and physical genocide. The Narragansett's land-rights struggle exploded in 2003 in what has come to be known as the "smoke shop raid." The Narragansett, who vigorously claim sovereign rights on their land in Charlestown, Rhode Island, opened a tax-free smoke shop in 2003. The smoke shop was to be an alternative economic engine for the Narragansett. However, on July 14, 2003,

Rhode Island Governor Don Carcieri ordered Rhode Island State Troopers to raid the smoke shop and seize all tobacco products. Lawsuits in both federal and states courts ensued from both sides. Criminal, constitutional, and civil actions were initiated again by both sides, but the smoke shop was shut down and the Narragansett people present for the raid were treated as criminals. The smoke shop raid was just one battle witnessed by Paulla since her childhood near Narragansett Bay. Paulla continues to be a strong advocate for land rights of the Narragansett and for the rights of the land.

Save The Bay emerged from the turmoil and explosive environmentalism of the late 1960's and early 1970's. Officially forming in 1970, Save The Bay has grown into a highly influential regional advocacy group. Today, Save The Bay is a well-respected, well-funded, and well-situated professional organization, boasting 39 years of environmental successes, a membership of over 20,000, and a professional staff of 33. Save The Bay has not just built membership; the organization has built a community of members with an environmental ethic predicated on the mission "to protect, explore and restore" Narragansett Bay as a unique human and non-human ecological community (Save The Bay).

> My specific concern is with how such rhetorical manifestations and discursive practices help or hinder the creation of sustainable, healthy communities and impact the materiality of the natural world.

Dwelling Bodies and Transformative Moments: Two Stories of Healing

In October 1972, Paulla Dove Jennings lost her ten-year-old son in a terrible tragedy. At ten, the young man was already an accomplished traditional native dancer. He was asked to perform at the grand opening of a local shopping village, and in a horrible instant he was caught in a water wheel, which broke his neck and led to his drowning. Thirty-six years later, Paulla still has to pause to compose herself when she speaks of this tragedy. To say that this event was devastating to Paulla would understate its impact. For months, she explained, she "was just like floating." In 2005, she discussed the loss of her son as part of a project called *The Pursuit of Happiness: An Indigenous View*. *The Narragansett Speak*. Paulla said, "The pain was of such a depth that family and friends thought they would never smile again. Like waves in the sea we ebbed and flowed to and from each other… Other than holding my remaining son and daughter close, I closed down emotionally" (*The Pursuit of Happiness*). Despite the pain, Paulla couldn't continue to float through life. She had her five-year-old son and her twelve-year-old daughter to care for. One day, toward the end of April, Paulla told herself "the only way you're going to let this go is to wash it off." Paulla explains how she and

her family began to heal:

> We went down to the ocean and it was cold and it was a beautiful day. It was probably in the 50's. It wasn't that warm, but it was a sunny day and we went to the ocean. At first we got our feet wet and it felt good, and we let the water come up perhaps to our knees and we just sort of let things go. Finally, we looked at each other. We just ran into the water. We got totally wet. We didn't bring any other clothes with us. We didn't plan on this. This was just a day I needed to get away and get out of the house, you know, probably get over the hurt and that was the beginning. It took years of healing for me.

Paulla's choice to go to the waters of Narragansett Bay to heal demonstrates how she "dwells" in and by the waters of Narragansett Bay. Max Oelschaeger suggests that to dwell is to become physiologically and subjectively comfortable with the notion that one is part of a place, that the place is "fundamentally intertwined" with one's own sense of being and with the possibilities for one's own humanity (157). The cleansing waters of the bay couldn't wash away all the pain Paulla felt, but when she embodied that place, and the sea and sand and wind all washed over her, it did take away the floating feeling and the terrible constraint placed on her ability to talk about the tragedy. Paulla is a gifted and nationally-recognized storyteller. She was on the very short list of people who spoke at the opening of the National Native American Museum at the Smithsonian Institute. To hear Paulla tell a traditional Narragansett story is to hear a culture speak through her. But with the loss of her son, the great storyteller was devastated. It was not a cultural story she needed to tell. It was the story of her son and of the terrible loss she and her family suffered. It was the bay that allowed her to change the story of her son's death from one of hopeless despair, to one of pain slowly healing. Again, as part of *The Pursuit of Happiness* project, she spoke of her son:

> Eventually each family member and friend was able to relate stories about the ten-year-old fisherman. This young Narragansett who loved the woods, and birds, and all living things. This boy who could fish for hours in the middle of the stream, catch a fish, carefully remove the hook, run to show it to his grandparents, and then release it back in the stream. Laughter and lightness slowly came back to our hearts and spirits when Mom was cleaning her freezer and came upon an unidentified package. Upon opening the package Mom realized it was a small octopus her grandson had caught on one of his fishing expeditions. We laughed. We remembered. And we chose to continue life. (*The Pursuit of Happiness*)

Paulla's story conveys the memory of a young man with a strong relationship to the natural world and his own sense of dwelling. Her story also conveys how those who felt his loss continued to inhabit and respect the

place that the young man loved.

Unfortunately, this would not be the only time Paulla had to call on the waters of Narragansett Bay to help with tragedy. Paulla tells of how her brother-in-law, "a proud Wampanoag"[2] and a "gentle fellow and a happy soul," was murdered by a "non-Indian man." This crime was, of course, devastating to Paulla and her family. Moreover, the man who committed the crime got what Paulla called "a slap on the wrist," and there was "no prison time, no anything." According to Paulla, the trial took "forever to happen" and was "traumatic enough." But after weeks of Narragansetts and Wampanoag filling the courtroom everyday, the trial ended and the man was released. Paulla tells of the day: "No prison time, no anything and when we came out—there were many Wampanoag and Narragansetts in court everyday—and when we came out we were devastated." At this point Paulla's sister, suffering from the loss of her husband and not finding any solace in the courts, turned to Paulla and the waters of Narragansett Bay for help: "My sister said 'Will you go to the ocean with me?' And we went to the ocean and we bathed and we washed and we prayed and grandmother ocean took away some of the pain."

When Paulla spoke to me about the memory of her trip to the ocean on that painful day, our conversation sparked memories about her brother-in-law and his relationship to Narragansett Bay. His connection to his ecological community became the center of her memories and the center of the stories she told of him. Paulla spoke about how his generosity was tied to his closeness to place: "He was the type who would get a taste for clams. He'd go out and dig some clams. 'You want some scallops? Oh, let's go get some scallops.' I mean he was a giving person. When he got them, he didn't just eat for himself, he wanted to share them with everyone." Paulla's brother-in-law "loved gardening" and "loved birds." He was "a fantastic dancer," and "you'd see him out there working in his garden and all of a sudden it was like music would come and his feet would move and you'd see him doing an Indian dance and he would just mesmerize you."

As Paulla told the story of her brother-in-law, her memories began to reveal her idea of what it really means to understand one's place in an ecological community. She explained:

> He was a person who loved the water, and the woods as well. But you can't have one without the other and that was the beauty of it and that was the beauty of him. I like to think of him out there sometimes, you know, a lot of Indian men like to go out and catch bluefish and they stand out there you know and I can see him out there in the water almost dancing to a hook. It's a good feeling and the bay does that to you. When you look at the shoreline and you see little grass hills and knolls and maybe you might see a turtle, whatever you happen to see there crawling along… I mean it's the gifts that we have, and most people don't see them.

Paulla's memories and stories of her experiences in and around

Narragansett Bay challenge us to expand our ideas of what it means to fully inhabit a place, to understand our relationships to our ecological communities, to fully appreciate them, live accordingly with them and, perhaps most importantly, advocate for them.

Activist Bodies and 1.7 Miles of Open Water: The Story of a Swim

One of the more important events held by Save The Bay each year is the annual Save The Bay Swim. Since 1977, thousands of people have participated in the event, and each year, hundreds of participants and volunteers join to raise pledge money and swim a 1.7 mile stretch of water in lower Narragansett Bay. Save The Bay has long considered the swim to be one of the most important, if not the most important, fundraising events held by the organization. Beyond the importance of the swim as a fundraiser, Save The Bay sees the swim as a symbolic and community building act. Not surprisingly, Save The Bay marshals considerable strategic resources to plan and execute the swim. The swim is an event comprised of dozens of well-planned rhetorical acts, both written and spoken, transpiring before, during, and after the actual swim. The swim event involves hundreds of bodies: some swimming, some planning, and some volunteering.

> The Swim symbolizes a community of care that embraces Narragansett Bay and its watershed and comes together to dramatize the importance of a clean and swimmable Bay.

I was a volunteer at the 2008 swim, which saw 413 swimmers raise more than $250,000. Like most volunteers, I was up at 4:00 a.m. on the morning of the swim and found myself amazed at the glowing sky and fluorescent waters that dawn brings to Narragansett Bay. I made my way over the Pell Bridge, which connects Aquidneck Island and Conanicut Island[3], where the swim would begin and end, respectively. On this day, like most, lobster boats off to an early start dotted across the bay, moving past moored, multi-million-dollar yachts. I, along with dozens of volunteers, worked to unload approximately two-hundred kayaks from the tops and backs of cars and trucks (kayakers accompany the swimmers across the bay), to complete kayak inspections, and to register teams of swimmers and paddlers.

Many of the swimmers had focused and intense looks on their faces. Most of the conversations were about swimming strategies, where exactly to enter the water from the beach, and what pace to keep. Voices bounded around the beach. “Well, here goes nothing.” “Have a good swim!” “Be careful.” Swimmers went in and out of the water to get their bodies accustomed to the water’s temperature and to direct their attention from the

wait and toward the challenge ahead. As the signal was given and the swim got underway, the orange caps worn by the individual swimmers looked like hundreds of fish breaking the surface of the water and splashing about. Then the kayakers too began their trip, gliding through the 1.7 miles of water to the other side.

It is clear that while attempting to maximize the potential fundraising for the organization, Save The Bay also approaches the swim as an act of advocacy. From the time of the very first swim in 1977, the swim was designed to be such an act. The 2008 edition of *The Swim Magazine*, a free publication put out by Save The Bay as part of the communication strategy for the swim, featured an interview with Trudy Coxe, who first had the idea of the swim when she worked for Save The Bay in the 1970's. Coxe confesses that the idea of the swim came from her own rather haphazard swim of the bay with a friend back when she was in high school. Coxe took her own experiences and saw them as a potential means to use bodies for advocacy. This approach to advocacy was not unusual for Save The Bay during the 1970's. The December 1972 edition of *Sentinel* (the then newsletter of Save The Bay) documents another use of bodies for advocacy when on the front page it captures volunteers running along various parts of Narragansett Bay carrying glasses of water. The different volunteer-runners, which included local media celebrities, politicians, and naval officers, carried glasses of water from one point of the bay to another to dramatize how pollution spreads through the waters of the bay. The suggestion is the water in the glass is polluted, and water polluted in one spot of the bay carries through the entire bay. This dramatization demonstrates the use of the body for advocacy as an early and highly visible form of rhetorical action outside the usual legislative lobbying dynamic.

In her 2008 interview, Coxe reflects on how the first Save The Bay Swim so powerfully demonstrated this bodily approach to advocacy. She notes that before the first swim, Save The Bay learned "that the water in front of the Bay View [where the swim would begin] was unswimmable. The waterfront was classified 'C' – it was polluted. We were devastated" (*The Swim* 5). Instead of canceling the swim, Save The Bay decided to boat the swimmers out 300 feet and have them jump into the water and begin the swim there. Coxe explains the importance of that first swim:

> Do you think there could have been a better message?…It was a beach that was so near to so many people and we learned, for the very first time actually, that it wasn't safe to swim there. There couldn't have been a better message about the need for Save The Bay… Although the 1977 Swim was a huge success… it was a few days before it sunk in that it could become an annual affair symbolizing people's commitment to protecting the Bay. (*The Swim* 5)

Like the very first swim event in 1977, advocacy remained a fundamental goal of the 2008 swim. Curt Spalding, the executive director of Save The Bay at the time of the 2008 swim, comments in *The Swim Magazine*

that along with the strong fundraising potential, "just as important" is that the "the Swim has become a living symbol of how much we care about Narragansett Bay as a natural resource" (1). Spalding continues to suggest that "we all are connected to the Bay in one way or another" (1). This connection is symbolized in the swim, which becomes a call for others to recognize their own connection to the bay. The Swim "symbolizes a community of care that embraces Narragansett Bay and its watershed" and comes together "to dramatize the importance of a clean and swimmable Bay" (*The Swim* 2).

Coxe's own personal swim of the bay as a teenager exemplifies a personal transformative moment, which would eventually become the impetus for the very first Save The Bay Swim some ten years later. It would appear that after thirty years, Save The Bay remains dedicated to creating opportunities for personal transformation through the swim. The winter 2008 issue of *Tides* (the most recent face of the Save The Bay newsletter) lists a number of new year resolutions that a reader may make, including, "THIS IS THE YEAR I WILL SWIM THE BAY" (8). The first-person construction of this statement highlights the very personal experience of swimming the bay. Clearly, Save The Bay places strategic importance on the belief that a personal connection to the bay is a critical step to advocacy. In the words of Save The Bay writers, "firsthand experience on and around the Bay provides a foundation for a lifelong commitment to working for a clean and healthy Narragansett Bay" (*The Swim* 21).

There are numerous reasons why someone decides to participate in the swim. Swimmers may be competitive athletes or may be trying to prove to themselves or others that they possess a particular strength, be it physical or mental. Many participate to help the organization or to share an experience with co-workers. The myriad of reasons that may bring a swimmer to the swim is captured succinctly by a Save The Bay blogger:

> There are too many individual motivational stories to give justice to each person's reason for wanting to do this swim, but they range from people overcoming overwhelming physical disabilities (from cancer to being paraplegic), to reaching milestones in their lives (just turning 30, just turning 70, just having a baby), to people just wanting to prove that they can swim 1.7 miles. It is always an inspiring day. So inspiring that I personally am hoping to swim next year instead of working! How can you not be inspired by so many motivated people, all swimming for the better health of themselves and for Narragansett Bay? ("Bay Blog")

Regardless of the reason for deciding to participate in the swim, the bodily connection to the bay offers a potentially transformative moment.

In 2008, swimmers emerged from the bay both exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. The swimmers were greeted with congratulatory exchanges from friends, family, and other swimmers. They enjoyed orange slices, bananas, small energy bars, and bottled water as they talked about a

"good swim" and "great conditions" that were "unlike last year," which was "very very windy." I watched two men, probably in their fifties, venture back into the water after exiting just a few moments earlier. They floated on their backs, each releasing a cathartic gasp, and rested in the water for about fifteen minutes. Nearby, I heard a father talking about his son. He spoke with great pride about how his son had performed in the swim. Much of the talk was about what a great day it was, but this talk of a "great day" seemed to indicate more than just placid water and sunshine.

Later, on the lawn area across the road from the small beach where the swimmers emerged from the water, there was an after-swim party. There was free food for all participants, and there were some vendor tents as well. There was also an awards presentation, which included awards for those who swam the bay in a time "under their age" and two awards to gentlemen who had participated in every swim for the past thirty years. Sponsors, supporters, volunteers, and staff were thanked for their time and commitment. Swimmers and their families sat about the lawn, eating, drinking water and juice, and resting. Most were half listening to the wrap-up speech with an occasional applause with what energy they could still muster. One woman nearby me talked about her swim, and she seemed to epitomize how most people looked and felt. She talked about how nice of a day it was, and finally, with a forceful exhale and what seemed like a moment of reflection, she commented, "It was a good swim."

Many of the people who swam the bay on that day in 2008 experienced, like Paulla Dove Jennings and her family, an empowering bodily encounter with Narragansett Bay. Their separate encounters with the bay opened transformative moments that began at the level of the body. These encounters transformed the stories they tell of themselves and conjured literate acts that reflect an appreciation for a relationship to the natural world. For Paulla and her family, the waters of Narragansett Bay created a moment when body and place came together to allow for a transformation of their narratives of unbearable pain to beautiful stories of tribute and love. It was Paulla's love for Narragansett Bay and the natural world, and her bodily connection to them, that helped change the story of her lost son from one of numbing despair to emotional healing.

For the swimmers, a story of "I'm turning 70" becomes a story of "I'm turning 70 and swam a 1.7 mile open-water challenge." What do the people say as they come out of the bay after the swim? How do they make sense out of their bodily connection to this place? What have their bodies taught them? The answers to these questions are articulated in countless discussions with family, friends, volunteers, and other swimmers over bottles of water, orange slices and protein bars immediately following the swim and later over cups of coffee, lunches, and walks along the bay weeks after the swim. For Save The Bay and the swimmers, the act of swimming connects bodies to the bay so that the swimmers come to find an empowering relationship to this dynamic ecological community.

One Piece of a Greater Ecological Puzzle

For Save The Bay Coastal Ecologist Marci Cole Ekberg, her love of Narragansett Bay stems in part from a larger, profound love of the ocean and the need to be around water as much as possible. Such a love grew in Marci as a child when her family would take trips from her Ohio home to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Marci says, "It was the ocean that really drew me from a young age. It makes me very happy to come to work everyday and see the water. Just having that connection to the water is very important to me." Marci's love of the ocean drives her work to protect her particular part of it. Marci suggests, "Every time I drive over the bridges, when I go down to Newport or come from Newport, I just love looking at the bay, and I think, wow, you know, I feel a little responsible for this. It's sort of like my jurisdiction. It's a great place to be."

The professional environmental advocates of Save The Bay and Paulla Dove Jennings are mindful of the place that defines their work, their beliefs, and their well-being; however, they are also keenly aware that Narragansett Bay is one small piece of a much larger biosphere. Their fight is always to protect the bay and advocate for its health and the health of the human and non-human communities that it supports, but their belief in healthy ecological communities does not stop at the edge of the Narragansett Bay watershed. Rather, such beliefs extend outward to the earth's entire biosphere. Moreover, their beliefs grow from a concern for an ecologically just world where the beauty and uniqueness of particular places all around the Earth are appreciated and protected, and where people understand the necessity of seeing the interconnectedness of all ecosystems, all communities, and all living things.

When I asked Wenley Ferguson, Save the Bay's Habitat Restoration Coordinator, what Narragansett Bay meant to her, she admitted, "I don't think I've ever thought of it that way." She continued rolling the question around in her mind for a few moments and finally answered, "What does Narragansett Bay mean to me? I guess I would back up and ask 'What does nature in general mean to me?' It is to me personally what makes me, what enhances my life, what nurtures me, what inspires me, and is one of my reasons for being." For Wenley, to compartmentalize Narragansett Bay in such a way was difficult. Although she frequently has to narrow her focus to a small piece of the bay in order to coordinate Save The Bay's eelgrass restoration program, she sees Narragansett Bay and the work she does there as part of something much larger. Wenley continues: "When you ask 'What does Narragansett Bay mean to you?' It's not just Narragansett Bay. Narragansett Bay in this case is what we are focusing on, but it is the natural world that we live in, and how we connect to it is important."

Many of the Save The Bay activists often speak, in one form or another, of "interconnectedness." For Wenley, the cornerstone of any ecological literacy is an understanding of this interconnectedness. She explains:

> We are talking about Narragansett Bay here, but any land mass wherever you are dropped in the world, you have a connection to water, and we are all in a watershed, and our actions affect it… . If you can connect those actions to some type of resource within the bay that makes people understand the bigger picture. So water use, and fertilizing your lawn, and where sewage goes, and the condition of your septic system. These types of connections are all part of an ecological literacy, and it's beyond Narragansett Bay. It's about understanding how we are connected to our streams, rivers, the bay, and beyond.

For Wenley, her connection to the bay is often at the level of the body. She can frequently be found digging through buckets of sediment for eelgrass shoots, pulling out a crab or clam worm to show one of the children of an eelgrass restoration volunteer.

Such interconnectedness does have its consequences, as John Torgan, Save The Bay's Baykeeper, is keenly aware. John is Save The Bay's chief advocate and spokesperson. As Baykeeper for Narragansett Bay, John shares a responsibility with other "Keepers" who are all part of the Waterkeeper Alliance. According to John, there are over 170 different "Keeper" positions, including other Baykeepers, Riverkeepers, and Soundkeepers. All Waterkeepers share a common commitment to protect communities, ecosystems, and water quality worldwide (*Waterkeeper Alliance*). Each Waterkeeper advocates for the particular body of water and particular community that he or she is charged with protecting. Like all other Waterkeepers, John's advocacy is shaped by his involvement with his unique place, Narragansett Bay. John's commitment then is to Narragansett Bay as a unique ecological community, to the Waterkeeper Alliance, and to a shared vision of healthy communities throughout the world.

A formative moment in John's professional life and an event that demonstrated for him and thousands of others just how interconnected Narragansett Bay is to the larger physical, cultural, and economic dimensions of the world was the 1996 North Cape oil spill off the Rhode Island coast. As Baykeeper, John was at the forefront of Save The Bay's response to the crisis, which included organizing volunteers for animal rescue, oil containment, and documenting the immediate effects of the spill. But John admits apart from his professional "trial by fire," the spill was also a "very important personal revelation." John explains:

> I remember a day or two after the initial spill going to our family's summer cottage, which is on Point Judith Pond, and seeing the cove in the front of our house covered in oil, and you know, it's an indescribable feeling. It just reinforces everything we do here to see the place you love totally screwed up by pollution and a certain instantaneous event.

Now, after more than a decade-and-a-half of fighting ecological disasters ranging from oil spills to invasive species to fish kills and

developing a first-hand understanding of how ecological communities from across the world can affect Narragansett Bay, John will tell you about his own personal connection to the bay:

> I think it runs in my blood. The bay is part of me. I've been here at Save The Bay for fifteen years. The bay and Save The Bay are such an important part of my identity that if I ever move somewhere else, or go do something different in my life it'll always be there. I can't draw that line between my professional identity and my career and my personal connection to the bay.

For Paulla Dove Jennings, there is no place on Earth more special to her than Narragansett Bay. However, her adoration for this particular place is a reflection of her commitment to all aspects of the natural world and her understanding of the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems. Paulla explains: "The bay is not separate from the earth, from the hills, any of it. It's all part of the puzzle. It's a puzzle that has kept us [the Narragansett] together here for thirty-thousand years. When I write or speak about the bay, it's usually about a relationship. It could be a relationship through animals, other living things, or people. It's not separate." Paulla readily gives examples of what she sees as the destructiveness caused by a lack of attention to the interconnectedness of living systems:

> You wonder why you see sometimes seafood that's a little bit deformed or you look in the paper or there's a news flash–no fishing in this area, or no scalloping in this area, no clamming in this area because of pollution and if we're destroying all our farm land or building on it or growing grass or sod for somebody's estate or golf course. By doing all of this we keep tainting the Earth, and Mother Earth has been so generous. She's given us so much and we don't give her any respect back. So when you talk about the bay, it's not just the bay. It's the people that surround it. You can't just talk about the bay and the water and the gifts we have without thinking about the people because it's all connected together.

Paulla's connection to Narragansett Bay is as profound as her will to fight for its well-being. Like the advocates of Save The Bay, Paulla's connection begins and is reinforced with the body. This bodily closeness to Narragansett Bay is the source of her prayers to the Creator and of her powerful voice that tirelessly advocates for a healthy ecological community for all, humans and non-humans alike.

For the Save The Bay advocates and for Paulla Dove Jennings, a biospheric literacy starts as an understanding of one's own immediate ecological community as well as an awareness of the ecological networks that support life over the entire biosphere. Moreover, such a biospheric literacy recognizes that humans, as the world's keystone species, have the ability to influence those networks, affecting both immediate and distant human and non-human communities. A biospheric literacy also means

caring for these ecological networks through social action and advocacy that promotes human and non-human rights, sustainable policies, environmental health, and environmental justice for communities across the entire earth. Ultimately, as the participants in this study demonstrate, a biospheric literacy is reflected in the way we care for our immediate places, the ecological communities that support us.

Notes

1. In consultation with the participants of this study and with their expressed permission, I use their real names in this essay and not pseudonyms. Although there may certainly be times when a researcher or participants find anonymity to be desirable or necessary, in the case of my research, I found such anonymity removed my participants from the credit for the work they do on behalf on their ecological communities and, to a degree, muted their voices.

2. The Wampanoag are a first nation from Massachusetts and the eastern side of Narragansett Bay (East Bay). The Wampanoag and Narragansett have had a long and complex relationship, which includes an alliance during the King Philip's War of 1675 and 1676. This alliance with the Wampanoag likely led to the Great Swamp Massacre, where nearly 600 Narragansetts, including a significant number of women, children, and elderly, were killed at the hands of European colonists.

3. Aquidneck and Conanicut are the original Native American names for these islands. Aquidneck Island is comprised of the City of Newport and the towns of Middletown and Portsmouth. The entirety of Conanicut Island is almost always referred to as Jamestown. I have decided to use the Native American names for these islands out of respect for the Narragansett people.

Works Cited

"Bay Blog." *Save The Bay.* 26 July 2008. 2 September 2008. http://www.savebay.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=605.

Brodkey, Linda. "Writing Ethnographic Narratives." *Written Communication* 4.1 (1987): 25-50.

Brown, Stephen G. "Beyond Theory Shock: Ethos, Knowledge, and Power in Critical Ethnography." Brown and Dobrin 299-315.

Brown, Stephen G. and Sidney I. Dobrin, eds. *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

Brown, Stephen, G. and Sidney I. Dobrin. "Introduction: New Writers of the Cultural Sage: From Postmodern Theory Shock to Critical Praxis." Brown and Dobrin 1-10.

Cushman, Ellen. *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

Denzin, Norman, K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. "Introduction: Entering the Field of Qualitative Research." *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* Eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994. 1-17.

Keller, Christopher. "Unsituating the Subject: 'Locating' Composition and Ethnography in Mobile Worlds." Brown and Dobrin 201-218.

Moss, Beverly, J. "Ethnography and Composition: Studying Language at Home." *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research*. Eds. Gesa Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992. 153-171.

Oelschlaeger, Max. "The Question for Truth." Interview with Sidney Dobrin and Christopher Keller. *Writing Environments*. Eds. Sidney I. Dobrin and Christopher J. Keller. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 149-165.

Reiff, Mary Jo. "Mediating Materiality and Discursivity: Critical Ethnography and Metageneric Learning." Brown and Dobrin 35-51.

Save The Bay. Home page. Save The Bay. September 2, 2008. http://www.savebay.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=879.

The Pursuit of Happiness: An Indigenous View. The Narragansett People Speak. Project. Director Dawn Dove. Exeter, Rhode Island: Tomaquag Indian Memorial Museum, 2005.

The Swim Magazine. Save The Bay. Providence: Ocean State Publishing, 2008.

Tides. Save The Bay Newsletter. 38:2 (2008).

Wolcott, Harry, F. *Writing Up Qualitative Research.* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001.

Waterkeeper Alliance. Home page. Waterkeeper Alliance. March 23, 2009. http://www.waterkeeper.org/mainaboutus.aspx.

Matthew Ortoleva is a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University of Rhode Island, where he specializes in rhetoric and composition. His research and teaching interests include environmental rhetoric and writing, ecocompositon, and place studies. He is currently completing his dissertation, entitled "Rhetorics of Place and Ecological Relationships: The Rhetorical Construction of Narragansett Bay," which examines the role of language in the construction of ecological relationships to the Narragansett Bay watershed. He has taught a variety of courses in the University's rhetoric and writing major.