

Season 6, Episode 2: Fostering diversity within environmental studies

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Camille Dungy

Camille Dungy: I came to understand the imperative, but also the very natural idea of toggling my thinking between human concerns and concerns of and for the greater than human world. Not tapping into that knowledge in a cultivating connected celebratory manner has robbed US culture of all of these possibilities of expansion and positive production, et cetera. The writing of that process helps other people to see that their doubts and difficulties are real and valid and to continue forward.

Joanie Mahoney: Hello and welcome to Campus Conversations, the podcast where we have in-depth conversations with the people who are working to address our planet's most pressing issues. I'm your host, Joanie Mahoney, president of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and we are so excited to welcome today's guest. Camille Dungy is an award-winning author and editor who has worked tirelessly to expand literature and environmental studies. She is a university distinguished professor in the English department at Colorado State University, and Camille is also ESF's 2024 honorary degree recipient. And as a fun fact to get us started, I will tell you reiterating what my co-host for today, Tyler Dorholt told me. And that is that every ESF course that uses an environmental literary component has been influenced by your work. So thank you very much. This student body at ESF is really excited that we are going to be honoring you at our commencement.

Camille Dungy: I am incredibly honored and touched by this, so I'm excited to be with you all.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, thank you and thanks for taking time with us ahead of time so we can get to know a little bit more about you as a person. I'm very interested in what it was like to grow up that led you to this path, which is unusual for folks to grow up and be authorities in nature and the environment. And then to add to it the component of literature and poetry. So what was it about your upbringing that helped mold you in this career?

Camille Dungy: Is this the age-old, is it nature or nurture question?

Joanie Mahoney: Yes.

Camille Dungy: I think in my case it's both. I grew up in the American West. I was born in Denver, but I moved to Southern California when I was just a toddler. It's useful because I'm back in Colorado and Colorado has justified opinions about people who moved to the state from California, but I get to claim Colorado born status when I've returned. But the places where I've lived have always existed inside really dynamic ecotones where the house I grew up in Irvine, California, quite

literally, you would walk out the front door and you would be in a very manicured human-built community of planned housing, et cetera. Terraced hillsides to make room for human needs. But our backyard backs onto a hillside that had not been tampered with. And so my backyard opened up onto the wild, onto this really relatively untouched greater than human landscape.

And so my childhood, it was natural for me to see both of those possibilities within a matter of moments in any given day. And so I came to understand the imperative, but also the very natural idea of toggling my thinking between human concerns and concerns of and for the greater than human world. And as I moved around the country, I think I was always seeking those spaces of deep connection with a wild wonder, and also knowing that my essentially suburban ideas and comforts could in some ways with careful planning coexist with that kind of experience. So my writing just sometimes goes out my front door and sometimes out that back door of my childhood experience.

Joanie Mahoney: That is a wonderful setting and I'm joined here by Tyler Dorholt, who most people at ESF know. But Tyler, will you take a minute to introduce yourself to the audience?

Tyler Dorholt: Yes, happy to be here. So I direct the writing program here at ESF and I also oversee the Digital Storytelling Studio, which is the space that helps produce these podcasts and is a wonderful immersive space for students, faculty, and staff to come and learn the tools of digital storytelling, to have our gear to go out into the field with and make films about the wonderful science that is being done here. But I'm also very much a humanities background fellow and a poet and a writer. And I'm consistently fascinated with how much work you have done to curate other people's work and to put together a framework and an entry point.

And I think that that's a gift that often gets overlooked because not only do we work toward not potentially pigeonholing themes or writers, but how do we allow these larger surfaces and entry points. And I'm wondering if you might be able to speak a little bit about ever since you began doing editorial work, what ways does it affect how you read and how you take in art and the world? Do you have to turn off a curatorial button in the mind sometimes or how does that play into your genre production as well?

Camille Dungy: That's a really interesting question. I do think that I have to turn off that curatorial mind. It might be one reason why I find myself jumping from project to project. Because if I start to read and work through the world too much in a transactional manner where I am just reading for content to fill whatever editorial project that I'm doing, I can eventually lose the pleasure of reading to just find work I like. And so then I jump to the next project so that I can return to that more innocent joy of discovering new things. I will always jump into a new

project so that I can do that because I do think it's one of the most important things to me about being a literary citizen and a citizen of the world of not...

Maybe it's part of this idea of not keeping your light under a bushel, which is one of my takeaways from my religious training that if you have a gift, you have to share it, that that's part of the responsibility of having a gift. And one of my gifts is seeing communities and worlds that are underrepresented. And by their being underrepresented, the culture loses out on not just beauty, but also solutions, possibilities, answers, ways of being and seeing and understanding the world that will help us to survive and to thrive. And so whenever I've stumble on communities with which I am connected and I have some way of helping to broaden the reception and attention that those communities can get for their very good work, I then feel this desire, responsibility, and joy with finding ways to share those.

Joanie Mahoney:

I haven't thought about it in probably 45 years, but I had that same message year after year in elementary school about if you have a talent, if you have a gift, you have a responsibility, you're really living that. And it goes always when you have what you talked about underrepresented voices and the culture that isn't participating in this broader conversation, everybody's missing out on that. It's not just the people for whom that story is real, it's for everybody that needs to hear from each other. I think I read a quote of yours that it isn't a conversation if all the voices aren't there it's a monologue, that really resonates with me. And it's not one-sided. Everybody benefits from hearing from everybody else. And I think you're defining precisely the role you're playing in that, facilitating the voices that the rest of the world isn't hearing, but for the work that you're doing.

Camille Dungy:

Right. I mean, I think it would be worthwhile to give some names and to labels to what we're talking about. And essentially it is racist, exclusionary ideology that has for some time caused a predominantly white literary community to assume that Black writers aren't saying important or interesting things about the environment and how to live and how to survive in the greater human world. And that's just folly, obviously, because the entire reason that the Black people were forcibly transported to this continent had a lot to do with expertise that Black people had in raising crops like indigo and cotton and sugar, the labor, et cetera. And then all of the that comes from that.

But where I want to go with this really is not within the victim paradigm of the Black population, but to really just say that not tapping into that knowledge in a cultivating connected celebratory manner has robbed US culture of all of these possibilities of expansion and positive production, et cetera. So every time energy is spent on silencing and marginalizing a group, that energy could be put in a whole different direction. And the possibilities for connection open up so many more avenues than any kind of silencing ever will.

Joanie Mahoney: I couldn't agree more. We have the benefit here at ESF of having a prominent platform for indigenous voices. We have the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, and that message is true with the indigenous community as well. And we've seen the benefit not just to ESF, but to the broader community, the deliberate attempt to welcome the voices from the indigenous community to the benefit of everybody. That's what I meant by always. We miss out if we don't hear about that traditional ecological knowledge. And as you're pointing out the expertise of a huge segment of our population that has a relationship with the land and can share that in this environmental space. And so you find these writers and you've compiled and edited anthologies to highlight some of these authors.

Camille Dungy: In 2009, I published an anthology called *Black Nature Four Centuries of African-American Nature Poetry*, and it remains the only anthology of that size to highlight the long tradition of environmentally engaged poetry in the African-American community going all the way back to Phillis Wheatley, who was the first Black poet in the English language to publish a book of poetry. So it's not like some sort of new concept. What has been joyful over the years that Black nature has been in the world are the number of writers who tell me that they're allowing themselves or understanding themselves to be writing environmentally engaged work that they didn't realize that as Black writers or writers of color that was allowed or available to them. And so when I published *Black Nature*, I can count on my hands the six poets who aren't in the original version of *Black Nature* because I couldn't get rights for their work.

And there's six that I can count on my hand that I'm really bummed aren't in the work for that reason. Now, if I were to do a new edition, I would be leaving out a whole lot more writers because there's just so many more people who are riding with this kind of environmental engagement because how can we not, right? How can we not in this moment have questions about climate, habitat, species loss somewhere in our minds? And so these questions are really directly at the forefront of so much of our literature, not just environmental literature anymore.

So that's been exciting to be part of a community of editors and scholars who have helped to make environmental writing mainstream, not some sort of niche that only certain kind of granola eating people. I'm laughing 'cause I have my jar, my reuse jelly jar of granola sitting right here next to me as I say this. So I am in fact a country granola kind of person. But it used to be that that was some sort of sideline community. And so I'm just happy that the work that I did was part of this expansion and that in that expansion than more voices of people of color could be just right there front and center.

Joanie Mahoney: And that is exactly what Tyler's been doing. And the other members of the writing department here at ESF is taking that and sharing it with class after class

after class of students. So I'd be interested, Tyler, for you to talk about the reaction that your students have when they're introduced to Black Nature.

Tyler Dorholt:

Well, specifically just embracing and teaching these books is another mode of inclusion that was absent in many academic settings. And students here, a handful of them have a minor in environmental writing, and one of the courses they take is a survey of environmental literature. And that particular, I always teach Black Nature. What's wonderful about the reactions that have come from the exploration of Black Nature is that students here are really interested in what kind of policies and actions can come out of the things that they're reading and engaging with. So everyone was tasked in one of these classes to present a poet that they found some kinship within the anthology and explore the biography of that, but also talk about how the issues that are within the poems could be discussed in a larger framework with the communities we're a part of here. So we have been for two and a half years running an environmental storytelling series, which we work through different themes in the community and we do one event downtown at one back up on campus, and we have different artists and storytellers come through these spaces.

So Vievee Francis was here to talk about the Antipastoral. And so I'm kind of interested to add onto this that students' reactions have just been profound and they've sought these poets and these anthologies out and they've gone after reading more. What are the ways in which you see potential links between the emotions and the sense of ownership we take over what we read and how that gets us into the community engaging with those things? You write about some of this in soil too, but do you see that there's a lot of work to be done between the links between how we read and understand the world and how we bring our reactions back out?

Camille Dungy:

That's a great and complex question, and I do think that it's been at the center of my, I guess my ethic of how and why I do this. The Black Nature Anthology is purposely not just chronological or alphabetical, but broken into 10 cycles that you can read a cycle just as itself or you could read the whole book. And that's largely about storytelling and connection for me, because if I made it chronological and started with that poem from 1770s, I would lose a fair number of readers because it's a little hard to directly engage with work that are outside your idiom. So I mixed up the timeline so that you could fall into a poem from the 19th century and then come into something that feels really current and then back and forth and move around and feel those connections. My last name is Dungy, and I will readily admit that if I get an anthology that's alphabetical, I will read through my section, maybe through the Es just for parody sake, and then I put the thing down and I never pick it up again.

So if your last name starts with Z or even M, I may not get there because I don't make it. So I wanted that kind of accident not to happen, and I wanted you to be able to read each of the cycles of Black Nature and get a story. Get some kind of

idea about how this environmentally engaged writing connected with a particular theme might manifest and walk away with a kind of knowledge. Storytelling is a fundamental mode of communication. Our whole idea of why humans are better than and different than any of the other life forms on this planet almost always revolves around language and tool use. And if language isn't a tool, I don't know what, so it's tool use and language is this tool for communication that we understand.

And then if that's going to be what I'm using, if that's the tool I'm using, I want to engage and I want to make connection, and I want to make connection that can lead to action. That action may just be going and finding more writers or more from that writer that you're interested in, but it may be the kind of action that comes from a different kind of understanding. And you think more about planetary care, more about what neighborliness might mean, more about any of the number of kind of things that environmentally engaged writers talk about. Because for many of us, meaning doesn't come just through data and figures and numbers. It comes through a story that connects with our heart and through our heart, we get to our mind.

Joanie Mahoney:

Listening to the way you're describing how language is a tool. So we have too many examples to count of the environmental injustices that have been borne disproportionately by communities of color. And that is true here in Syracuse, New York. Your teaching, your writing, your anthologies, strike me as such a gift to people to say, "I have a role in this. I have a voice in this. This isn't just something that's going to happen to my community. I can be an active participant." And that connection to the heart through the stories is going to prompt the action that is necessary, especially in these frontline communities. I'm happy to hear that our writing department is not only teaching Black Nature, but putting it in action with these visits out in the community and making sure that a broader audience than just our students is aware of your work and aware of the voice that everybody can have in this conversation.

So it's such important work, and I'm grateful that you're doing it and really surprised there isn't more of this work that's been done. There's not more people collecting these poems and these stories and I think have started rolling a snowball down the hill that will get bigger and bigger. And as you said, if you were to do a new edition right now, it would be much bigger. But when I think about being out in the community and I look at where the most harm has come from environmental decisions that people have made, and then to just think about these young people not seeing themselves in the story, but for what you're doing. Do you get out into the community and have these opportunities to hear from people who've been moved by your work?

Camille Dungy:

Yes, I do. So my new book, *Soil, The Story of a Black Mother's Garden*, really I think a lot about the ongoing impact of that legacy of separation and silencing and siloing, and the ways that even for me, even for me, who we've just spent

all of this time talking about, really my entire literary career. My first book was published in 2006 and then *Black Nature* in 2009. And so my whole career has been in writing with this kind of connection, and I still in the process of writing *Soil*, beginning in a focus manner in the year 2020, had to remind myself that I had a place in the environmental canon. Because so much of the traditional foundational environmental canon that I was raised reading was so white and so male, and so about solitude and being in some sort of pristine, isolated place. That the idea of being a Black mother writing about seeking a connection to the wild, wonderful world while being in shutdown with my fourth grader in my suburban house, it just didn't feel like, is this really nature writing?

Is this really environmental writing or am I just faking my way into it? And so if that's the case for me, why wouldn't it be that way for people who for many, many, many aspects of their identity have been actively excluded from the canon of environmental writing? And so these kinds of moves that we make towards extending and embrace towards other ways of being human in the world, in the world of environmental writing are as important as the moves that the art world makes towards reaching out towards artisans and weavers and people who make blankets or do those kinds of other things that were called crafts or artisans but not art, right?

All of these kinds of manifestations of broadening imagination that I can participate in, even if it means reliving birthing pains myself to really trust that right to be showing up in this space, in this way, I am all for it, and I'm all for modeling how difficult it is. So in *Soil*, I don't just write that I'm doing it. I write the process of how it is difficult and why it is difficult to show up in the world in these ways. And I think the writing of that process helps other people to see that their doubts and difficulties are real and valid and to continue forward.

Joanie Mahoney:

It wasn't just that these folks that you just described as white and male and solo, it wasn't just that they formed sort of this club about who gets to write about the environment, but they defined what it was for all the rest of us, this is what environmental writing is, these are the perspectives that matter, and they kind of defined it in a way that excluded a lot of us. And you're knocking that down at its foundation and saying that's part of it, but you're missing a big part of it if you're excluding people for whom that wasn't the experience. But nature and the environment is a huge part of their existence and of all of our existences.

And I don't think this is the only area where that has happened, that the people that got there first kind of made all the rules and defined the parameters for all the rest of us. And I just love this example that you're just kicking that door open and saying, fine, you have your value and your perspective, and we will read what you have to say, but not all of us can go out and sit and Yosemite for weeks on end in order to be inspired to write about the environment.

- Camille Dungy:** And it shouldn't be that way. We're not going to make any kind of truly functional change if the only way that you can believe that you've had some connection to the greater than human world is to go sit in it by yourself, because most of the human population doesn't have that luxury. So we really have to figure out.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You're going to exclude all the mothers.
- Camille Dungy:** Yeah, and just people who live in high density areas, which probably more of us should be living in high density areas because of the human population we cannot all have massive acreage, that just won't work. It's just by necessity, I think we have to really reframe this conversation and also such a small percentage of the human population speaking for...
- Joanie Mahoney:** The rest of us.
- Camille Dungy:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I agree.
- Tyler Dorholt:** I'm so happy to hear you talk about process. I gave a workshop panel a couple of weeks ago on process as storytelling, and the ways in which I think about it I think come into play when I'm navigating or reconciling, is this part of my day a poem? Is this part of my day a paragraph? Is this part of my day something that needs to be fictionalized? And I'm curious as to how you have allowed for genre to either collage itself to be a collaborative thing. Or if there have been moments where those things have hard separations for you, and especially in relative strangers, when you know that you want to embrace and write about that which is right in front of you, your children or becoming a part of the world with and alongside others, and more toward how you find that space to say like, nope, I'm sticking with this part of the writing today.
- Camille Dungy:** Thanks for nodding to Guidebook to Relative Strangers, because an essay in that book that might point to this that I was trying to write. I was trying to write an essay about... Having to, getting to be a book tour, I published a bunch of books and anthologies write in the same little pocket of time when I was also trying to be up for tenure. And so I had to promote these books, I had to do that, but I also had just had a child. And so I was traveling all over the country on book tour. She was nine months old when I started this. And going as far as traveling from the San Francisco Bay Area to Fort Camp, Maine, which is the North Eastern most in the continental US with a nine-month-old. And it was crazy. And everybody thought that I was crazy, and I was trying to write this essay that was kind of a log book story about what was going on with that and why I was having to do it, the economic imperatives and the professional and creative imperatives.

And I also was for some reason just obsessed with... Well, because I'm fascinated by history and how our history always intersects with our presence, but I was really, in this case, fascinated by California Bay Area history. And all of these stories of people who were sort of trying to make it to succeed and make their lives and their dreams successful. And some of them did, and some of them just catastrophically just did not work out. And the stories were all around me and I couldn't stop thinking about them. And I was trying to create this, I didn't know what it was. Was it going to be a poem? Was it a braided essay? And then one day I was out for a walk with the baby and walked on one of those placards that you build into the sidewalk that'll tell you something about something. And I was like, oh, right. History is always right under our feet and we just carry on our lives. And then the structure of the essay became clear, and it's just an essay with all the story of the traveling with the baby and the present day.

And then all of those Bay Area history stories are footnotes underneath the essay that only worked in print. It doesn't work online. The form really becomes part of the function for me. I think that's where the artist in me comes out, that I'm always trying to communicate. I'm trying to use the tools of language and technologies of a book or any other kinds of ways that I'm sharing the work. And sometimes a poem is the answer is the way to do it. Sometimes an essay, sometimes an essay with jazz hands like that one that I just described. In the case of Soil, I also included photographs and photographic images because I know that so many of us are visual now, and that if I didn't include enough of a guide for you to really see what you were looking at, you would just go to Google and then I would lose you forever.

And so I knew that I needed to include images in the book to meet you where you were going to be so you could trust that you could see some of these things. And it just comes to me, I think, Tyler, in the process of... I mean I make it sound easy, but it comes to me in the process of working towards trying to find the best way to communicate these big feelings and ideas.

Tyler Dorholt: That's great. And that the working toward is just, it is forever in it's footsteps, right? It's the embodiment of that. And I think with your work and with a lot of what I'm trying to work on, it's fighting against the linearity of time and the false linearity of history. And so it's so nice to hear that footnote essay as a way to look at that. And so grateful for your work in that space.

Camille Dungy: Thank you. Thank you.

Joanie Mahoney: So we are going to be welcoming you to our campus and you will be getting an honorary degree. It was quite the extensive process for us to go through as part of the big state University of New York system, and they gave us their blessing and we were very excited about that. And we're happy that you can join us. And then I think you'll have a few minutes to say what you would like and address

our students, most of whom will be familiar with your work because all of our students take writing and these instructors have been teaching your work.

Camille Dungy: I am so excited to be there. I already wrote my comments because you are an inclusive community, you need it for the translators and the captioning. So I am actually always delighted when somebody tells me that they need the work early for that reason. I was just so tickled by this invitation in general and really specifically this institution.

Joanie Mahoney: Well said. So I will leave you on that note and wish you well in your travels across country, and we will look forward to seeing you in person. Tyler, I think you're going to be part of the group that will...

Tyler Dorholt: Yes, hanging out, giving you a tour on Saturday and spending time to dinner with some other writers.

Joanie Mahoney: I just want to say one last thing, and that is that I had the benefit of being at Tyler's department meeting when they made the announcement that you were going to be the honorary degree recipient and to a person. It was big smiles and enthusiasm, and I knew we had somebody special. So looking forward to seeing you, and I really appreciate you taking time ahead so that we can get to know a little bit more about you.

Camille Dungy: Thank you so much, Joanie. Thank you, Tyler. And I will see you on the weekend.