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FINDING HOME

Teaching Nature Writing in the Urban Multicultural Setting

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GREEN ASSUMPTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Having now had the benefit of several years of reflection on the experience, I would like to discuss several of the major challenges I faced while teaching nature writing to undergraduate students at Florida International University, an ethnically diverse state university located in the city of Miami. In particular, I think it valuable to consider the ways in which teaching environmental literature within an urban, multicultural setting poses special difficulties and creates special opportunities that have received far too little attention among scholars of American nature writing. First, however, let me offer three brief anecdotes that help illustrate the issues I hope to address in this article, and why I feel they are so important; each story is true, and each is drawn from my experiences with undergraduate students in an upper division English course called "Literature and the Environment."

I once offered students a paper assignment option that required them to compose a personal narrative describing the most moving "wilderness experience" they had ever had. Very few students chose this option, and the responses of those who did demonstrated that my own general understanding of wilderness, which I had until then unconsciously considered normative, was in fact quite conditioned and subjective. Typical of responses to this assignment option was Roberto's enthusiastic, passionate, unironic essay, in which he offered a lyrical paean describing the inspiring view from atop an immense gravel pile at the edge of town, a pile that existed only to fill the wetlands that would shortly become yet another housing tract.

Once, while teaching John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), I was delighted with my student Ellen, who was remarkably engaged by Muir's persona, his adventures, and the literary techniques by which he argued on behalf of the value of Sierra wilderness. Throughout the semester, Ellen would frequently catch me in the halls to energetically express continued admiration for Muir as a person, a writer, and a preservationist. When the final essays of the semester came in, I was surprised to find that Ellen's essay was neither inspired by nor written on John Muir. When I met with her to discuss the paper, I shared my surprise that she had not chosen to write on Muir. Rather awkwardly and very sincerely, Ellen explained that having never seen a mountain in her life, let alone the sublime high country of Yosemite, she feared that she was not adequately qualified to discuss Muir's work.

I once took a group of undergraduate nature writing students on a weekend canoe trip on the Peace River in southwest Florida. During the planning stages of the trip, Victoria, one of the best students in the class, asked to meet with me privately. In the meeting, she explained that she had never been in a canoe, and then, in a moment of terrible insecurity and wonderful courage, asked whether her obesity

would prevent her from participating in the trip. I assured her that the canoe would carry her safely, and she consequently joined us on the outing. During the campout, Victoria enthusiastically reported that she had never seen so many stars, indeed, that she had not known that so many existed. When, on the long, Sunday night drive home the several cars in our party stopped at a gas station on the edge of the city, Victoria was sobbing. When one of her classmates asked her what was wrong, she said only that “the stars were disappearing” as we approached Miami.

Taken together, these three anecdotes suggest several troubling things about the teaching of nature writing in urban, multicultural environments. First, the stories remind us that we too often take for granted that students will share our understanding of wilderness: what it is, why it matters, and whether it is something one should wish to experience. My first mistake, then, was in assuming a shared general definition of wilderness and the value of wilderness experience. These anecdotes also demonstrate that experiences in the natural world are never equally accessible to all our students; my mistake here was in failing to realize that place-bound urban students would often have little familiarity with landscapes beyond the immediate physical environments of the city. These teaching experiences further suggest that many of our students have real fears—fears stemming from all sorts of legitimate and often unpredictable concerns—about encountering the physical environment without the many forms of mediation that are now so routine in urban lives. I mistakenly assumed that students would necessarily share my enthusiasm for and comfort with experiencing the natural world in a physically direct way. As is so often the case in teaching, my pedagogical mistakes taught me volumes about the limitations of my own understanding, and the adjustments those mistakes compelled improved not only my teaching, but also my thinking about environmental literature and about environmental issues generally.

The sorts of mistakes I made during my first year teaching environmental literature in Miami perhaps suggest the flawed assumptions under which many teachers of nature writing routinely operate. Until recently, scholars of American nature writing have focused primarily on a distinctly green canon of works that tend to share and celebrate certain assumptions about the definition and value of wilderness. “Classic” American nature writing texts—one thinks of Henry Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854), John Muir’s *Mountains of California* (1894), Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), and Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge* (1991)—tend to be nonfiction books that through use of the personal voice, meditate on the beauty of wild nature while celebrating the intellectual, aesthetic, or spiritual value of individual encounters with the natural world. Many of these books focus on landscapes that are unusually spectacular, pastoral, or monumental, and most contain an implicit or explicit call for the protection and preservation of wild places, places where nonhuman nature is predominant and the conveniences of a technological civilization are intentionally kept at a distance. Most of these texts, though certainly not all, have also been produced by white, middle-class authors who, regardless of their own urban or suburban origins or places of residence, actively valorize the purity of the wilderness experience while questioning the alienation from nonhuman nature they find dramatized by city life.

Although I have no wish to quarrel with the correctness or incorrectness of the assumptions implicit in the sort of nature writing I have just characterized, I do want to urge teachers of environmental literature to recognize those assumptions as assumptions, as ideas that are thoroughly conditioned by the places we live, the val-

ues we inherit, and the families we are born into. Using my own experiences (and willingly acknowledging that “experiences” is often little more than a polite way of referring to “mistakes”) teaching nature writing in the urban, multicultural classroom, I want to suggest the pedagogical costs of these unquestioned assumptions and consider adjustments that may make the teaching of environmental literature more interesting and useful to a constituency of students whose assumptions about wilderness and its representative literature often differ significantly from our own.

THERE'S NO HOME LIKE PLACE

Scholars of nature writing are necessarily concerned with sense of place, with the myriad ways in which humans understand, modify, and express their relationship to the ecosystems and immediate physical environments they inhabit. Perhaps nowhere in North America is sense of place so complex as in Miami, an ethnically diverse urban center poised on the edge of one of Earth's most critically endangered ecosystems, the Everglades. In South Florida, nature and culture are often juxtaposed in unusual and perilous ways. Loggerhead turtles nest in the sand near high-rise condominiums, manatees drift among powerboats in the channels of the Ten Thousand Islands, and panthers use specially designed wildlife tunnels to cross beneath Interstate Highway 75 in nearby Big Cypress swamp.

One of the most influential mediators between humans and the physical world is the concept of home. Whereas the term suggests an intimate bond between humans and their local environments, South Florida is frequently the home of people whose cultural and environmental roots and bonds lie elsewhere. In Miami, a cosmopolitan urban area of 3 million that is populated largely by immigrants, exiles, refugees, transients, retirees, and tourists, the concept of home is unusually plastic and elusive. People make pilgrimages to Miami from very different places, following projections of homes they have imagined or working desperately to return to homes from which they are in exile. These various species of transience or cultural homelessness often lead to devastating effects on local ecosystems, as the deplorable ecological condition of the Everglades strongly suggests. For example, the serious agricultural pollution that plagues South Florida is the direct product of crops and growing techniques that are particularly ill-suited to the delicate wetlands ecosystems of the region. Likewise, the environmentally destructive real-estate empires for which the state is unfortunately famous have often been built by people from outside the region so that other people from outside the region might vacation in Florida. Thus, the state has become more a site for industrial agriculture and industrial tourism than a place that is thoughtfully inhabited by people with deep roots in the land. The plight of the Everglades is an unfortunate reminder that we tend to love, care about, and fight for the places we consider home, whereas we remain necessarily less invested in the welfare of environments through which we pass on our way to and from the places to which we feel most closely related.

Although canonical American nature writing tends to celebrate a love of nature inspired by a powerful sense of attachment with the wider nonhuman world, it is increasingly clear that such an attachment may not be taken for granted. Indeed, the prevailing design of American cities and the condition of many who live there suggests that alienation from nature is a more profound, if not also a more common, experience. The assumption that the urban world is fatally separate from the natural world is sufficiently clear in our spontaneous assumption that nature exists only outside the city, an assumption that unfortunately prevents full recognition of the obvious fact that cities exist within ecosystems, just as do rivers and forests. If one

purpose of nature writing is to express and encourage a nurturing relationship of human culture to place, it would seem that greater recognition of urban environments, which are, after all, the places where most Americans live, is in order. Or, to frame the issue as a question regarding pedagogy: How should teachers of environmental literature talk about “sense of place” in cities, places inhabited—at least in the case of Miami—by many people whose moral investment is often in a “home” other than the place where they live?

I came to Miami from a rural Appalachian community in which people who had lived in the area for only two generations were considered the new neighbors. When I began teaching nature writing in Miami, I incorrectly assumed that my students would be deeply rooted in the local and regional environment. As it turned out, many students were, like myself, relative newcomers, and few of us knew much about the ecosystems surrounding the city in which we found ourselves. Thus, class discussions of sense of place inevitably became either theoretical (ruminations about place as a category of human experience) or oblique (conversations about places other than the one we actually inhabited).

Frustrated by this pedagogical impasse, I decided that we could not profitably discuss sense of place—a concept so central to American environmental literature—until we had such a sense for Miami and its natural environs. I proceeded to excise from the syllabus Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* and Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, two wonderful books that as literary representations of the desert, were nevertheless most alien to my students’ immediate experience in the concrete canyons of the city and the bright expanses of wetlands beyond it. Instead, I devised a unit in which students would write a brief environmental history of their own neighborhood. What written or oral narratives of the previous lives of their place could they discover? What nonhuman beings were former or current residents of the place where they live? What sorts of plants grew on their street, and under what conditions? When, why, and how was the landscape of their neighborhood converted to its present use? Finally, what was the landscape of their place like 100 or 1,000 or 10,000 years ago?

Within a week, my students were telling stories about the land beneath their neighborhoods, and doing so in ways that were more profitable than I could have imagined. They were repeating stories of place they had gathered from old people on their streets, identifying the trees growing along the sidewalk in front of their apartments, and informing me of the likelihood that tapirs and peccaries and capybaras and tortoise-armadillos and glyptodonts and lions and hyenas and dire wolves had once lived where they now did. The benefits of this localized approach to the study of sense of place were several: We learned a great deal more about where we were in the world; we used our research and writing to establish a connection with a place that might otherwise have seemed a stopover on the way to or from our real home; and, we developed a keen appreciation for the process of discovering and representing place that is the core dynamic of nature writing. In short, my urban Literature and the Environment course was more effective when I began not with the assumption that we already had a developed sense of place, but rather that we might use the class as an opportunity to cultivate a stronger attachment to our local environments.

WHAT I DID ON MY SUMMER VACATION

Think of a few of the landscapes celebrated by canonical nature writing: Henry Thoreau’s Walden Pond; John Muir’s Yosemite and Alaska; John Burroughs’s

Catskills; Annie Dillard's Piedmont Blue Ridge; the desert southwest of Mary Austin and Edward Abbey; the northeast beaches of Henry Beston and John Hay; the Arctic of Richard Nelson and Barry Lopez. As a teacher of environmental literature in Miami, the salient similarity among these various landscapes, apart from the fact that they have been described and celebrated by some of our most gifted writers, is that my students had never actually seen any of them. As one of my opening anecdotes made clear, some students had never seen a mountain. In most semesters, every student in my Literature and the Environment course will have been to Disneyworld, but none will have visited Walden, Yosemite, or Alaska.

I do not wish to suggest that we should only teach books that represent places our students find familiar, and I recognize the value of literature that inspires imaginative journeys to other landscapes. However, I think it imperative that we begin to recognize and measure the gap between urban students' experiences and the places celebrated by the canonical nature writing texts most often taught. If the main purposes of nature writing include describing the specifics of a particular place, suggesting the importance of experiential encounters with the land, encouraging a relationship with nearby nature, and defending the value of intimacy with a home landscape, then it strikes me as unfortunate that so many urban students of American nature writing are asked to read so many books about other people's places.

Why had my students in Miami failed to make pilgrimages to the holy sites of the green canon? Put simply, most could not afford to travel to such places. Many had family obligations that prevented them from leaving the city, and most worked regular jobs to pay for their education. Indeed, the concept of "summer vacation" is itself alien to struggling, place-bound, urban students who usually work and attend classes during those months when more economically privileged students might have the opportunity to visit Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon.

Without intending to indict canonical nature writing texts for their implicit classism, I do think we need to be more aware that the romantic and pastoral assumptions that often influence our selection of such texts are at least partly cultivated by economic privilege. Love of wilderness and its representative literature is very often contingent upon exposure to wilderness (in a lovely place, in decent weather, and with proper equipment), yet, we rarely acknowledge that the likelihood of such exposure depends not only on a desire to visit wilderness, but also on time and money: two commodities in especially short supply among a large class of urban students. Thus, I think it would be useful if we began to consider the pedagogical costs of teaching only books that, to borrow a metaphor from conservation biology, might be considered the literary version of "invasive exotics": texts representing alien landscapes that are, for economic reasons alone, practically inaccessible to many students. Again, let us frame the issue as a question regarding pedagogical practice: How should teachers of environmental literature in urban places attempt to bridge the considerable gap between the writers' and the students' experience of the natural world, a gap that is often indirectly measurable by a difference in economic class?

When I began teaching nature writing in Miami, I could not have predicted how place-bound my students would be, nor how alien the natural world outside the subtropics would appear to them. The geographical location of the city made travel to anyplace outside the state expensive and inconvenient, and the condition of many students' family finances rendered such travel unlikely in any event. Thus, I had devised a syllabus of American nature writing's "Greatest Hits," no one of which represented a place that was familiar to my students. Confronted one day by the entirely ingenuous but equally impossible question, "What does the Grand Canyon

look like?" I realized that there was also a chasm between my own and my students' experience of nature, and that the gap between us was often a product of economics alone. Indeed, my students very much wanted to see the places the authors described, but simply could not find it within their means to do so.

To respond to this problem of invasive exoticism in my course, I again made adjustments to my syllabus, and began working literary representations of regional and local landscapes and creatures into our assigned readings. Often, I would pair literary representations of subtropical nature with more canonical nature writing: John Muir on the red squirrel paired with Archie Carr on the sea turtle, or Henry Thoreau on the loon paired with Charles Bergman on the manatee. Or I would pair descriptions by the same author on Florida and on some other place: Muir on South Florida and Muir on Yosemite, or William Bartram on Central Florida and Bartram on Pennsylvania forests. In subsequent versions of the course, I often substituted Florida nature writing for more canonical texts, for example, replacing Aldo Leopold's 1949 book *A Sand County Almanac* with Marjory Stoneman Douglas's 1947 book *The Everglades: River of Grass*.

Shifting from the Greatest Hits format toward a mixture of canonical and local nature writing had a number of salutary effects. It acquainted us with local authors whose work was often a vital part of the cultural life of our community, it augmented our knowledge about and sharpened our perceptions of the landscape we inhabited, and it mitigated the role of economic disparities by introducing students to accessible places they had both the time and money to visit for themselves. I believe that as urban teachers of nature writing, we need to be especially sensitive to the economic constraints that limit our students' ability to connect with the texts we require them to buy and to read, and we should seek opportunities to include literary representations of local and regional landscapes among the celebrations of monumental landscapes so often found in canonical environmental texts.

IN MY COUNTRY

Sense of place in Miami is further problematized by the remarkable diversity of cultures inhabiting the city. For example, nearly 100 nationalities are represented among the students and faculty of Florida International University alone, and one routinely hears English, Spanish, French, and various pidgin, Creole, and patois Caribbean dialects spoken on campus. Miami thus offers a valuable opportunity to examine how a confluence of cultural assumptions about the environment preconditions student responses to the nature writing we teach. Because a sustainable relationship between cultural diversity and biological diversity is increasingly vital to the ecosystems on which humans depend, there is an especially urgent need to foster dialogue concerning the relationship of nature to culture within the urban, multi-cultural classroom.

Most canonical American nature writing makes a number of closely related romantic or pastoral assumptions about the natural world: Unmediated experience of nature is possible and highly desirable; it is a privilege to have direct experience of wild nature; individual experience in natural communities is often preferable to interpersonal experiences in human communities; nature is a refuge from the vices of overcivilization spawned in the cities; the wildness and freedom of nature should not be lost to domestication by human culture; interference with natural systems is presumptuous, dangerous, and perhaps even in violation of a principle of Earth's sacredness; and, immersion in nature leads to physical and spiritual purification

and, occasionally, to mystical experiences or to a perceived transcendence of factitious human limitations.

Although we often fail to critically examine such assumptions, teaching environmental literature in Miami made painfully obvious to me that all such assumptions are extremely culture bound. A few brief examples from student essays may help illustrate the importance of this point. I asked students in the Literature and the Environment class to write a personal narrative describing a natural place of special importance to them. Because the class was made up primarily of first- and second-generation Americans, many students wrote about natural places in their home countries. A student named Wayne explained that the savannas and rainforests of his home country of Guyana are among the most beautiful places on Earth, but immediately added with concern that non-Guyanese environmentalists were wrongfully attempting to control Guyanese natural resource policy. He wrote,

On my last visit home [to Guyana] I discovered that the "International Watchdogs" actually had the power to restrict natural resource development and so condemn eight hundred thousand resident citizens of my country to the "third world" for at least the next fifty years. The naturalist groups are all from developed "first world" countries such as Germany, America, and Canada. The average income in my country is . . . equivalent to about four dollars and fifty cents A DAY. I wonder if the naturalists know what it is like to raise a family on forty-nine cents an hour?

Wayne clearly appreciated the natural beauty of his country, but also felt understandably frustrated, as did a number of other international students, that human poverty was not adequately represented in the preservationist agenda. Indeed, only his family's engagement in the environmentally destructive industry of gold mining had made it possible for Wayne to be one of the few among his peers to receive health care and education.

In response to the same assignment, a Peruvian student named Juan described the lovely beaches of his home country but explained that random, periodic terrorist attacks by the Maoist guerrillas of the Sendero Luminoso made the coastline dangerous to visit. Another student, Fernando, told of trips to his grandmother's lovely farm in the mountains of Brazil, but remarked that the robbers who ruled the hill country made travel to the farm unsafe. Other students likewise began their narratives describing beautiful natural places, but ended by lamenting the war, crime, poverty, or disease that had either destroyed the beauty of the place or made it perilous to visit.

John Muir's preservationist agenda must have seemed unacceptably elitist to Wayne, who associated environmental protection with the indigence of his countrymen. Juan must have had to fight the fear of terrorism to appreciate Henry Beston's Great Beach. The Haitian woman whose fellow villagers had been poisoned by waterborne parasites bred of poor sanitation must have cringed as Henry Thoreau exalted in his neck-deep wade into the swamp. The West African man who saw entire communities destroyed by drought must have found it difficult to appreciate Mary Austin's celebration of the desiccated wilderness of the American Southwest. Once again, let us frame this difficult and important issue of multicultural responses to nature as a direct question regarding pedagogy: How can teachers of environmental literature accommodate the richness of culturally diverse approaches to nature while also identifying shared experiences on which to base group discussions of the literature of place?

When I began teaching environmental literature in Miami, I was unfortunately naïve about the many complex cultural associations—many of which were quite negative—my students would bring to their study of nature writing. When I began receiving essays such as those by Wayne and Juan, however, I was forced to reassess the powerful and often invisible assumptions—assumptions every bit as culture-bound as those of my students, of course—that conditioned my own understanding of nature and its representative literature. In response to this new challenge, I made two significant adjustments to my teaching, one having to do with what we did in class, and another having to do with what we did outside class.

In the first instance, I simply made available time and opportunities for my students to tell stories about the natural world in their home places. Doing so might be as simple as asking during class if the landscape being described in the book currently under discussion reminded anyone of a landscape in their place of origin. Occasionally I would invite students to describe, or write about, or share with the class some examples of landscape writing from their home country or home place. I also found it effective to offer students comparative assignments in which they might choose, for example, to discuss a canonical work of nature writing from a cultural perspective different from that which engendered it. These adjustments worked very well to build trust and facilitate communication among class participants and to help open a profitable dialogue regarding the role of cultural assumptions in various literary constructions of environment.

In addition to this attempt to accommodate discussion of various landscapes within the classroom, I also wanted students to be able to share and compare their impressions of a single landscape, one they had all seen for themselves and could comment on with an authority born of personal experience. To make this possible, I began organizing modest but regular class trips to nearby sites in the Everglades. Eventually, the Glades became a kind of common landscape that bridged various differences among class participants. To be sure, our interpretations of local wetland landscapes varied by individual, just as did our interpretations of literary texts. Nevertheless, there was a new sense in the class—quite magical at times—that we were all reading the same book, that the Everglades had become our touchstone text, and that our shared experiences there also gave us a shared stake in everything else we worked on together. In effect, the Glades had become everybody's home country.

THE ART OF LOCATION

My intention in this article is not to prescribe particular answers to the complex, difficult questions raised by the teaching of environmental literature in urban, multicultural settings. Pedagogical situations obviously vary widely depending on the material being taught, the demographics of the students, and the nature of the surrounding landscape. However, I think the question of how best to teach nature writing in such settings deserves more careful attention than it has generally received. Because those who teach the literature of nature in urban settings routinely share the classroom with a heterogeneous group of students from a wide variety of backgrounds, more should be done to recognize the remarkable diversity of approaches to nature and nature writing. In particular, I suggest we actively accommodate the various ways in which concepts of nature, wilderness, and preservation are constructed according to social, cultural, and economic influences and assumptions. This also means doing more to recognize the ways in which our own assump-

tions about nature are constructed, and foregrounding rather than eliding those assumptions so that our students may question their validity as part of the legitimate critical enterprise of the course.

There is a truism that the three most important considerations in buying a house—an activity often closely related to the more important project of finding a home—are location, location, and location. A similar observation might be made about the teaching of nature writing, an activity that should help students to appreciate their local environment, to understand their location within it, and to locate themselves in the world. As I have suggested in anecdotal descriptions of my own pedagogical mistakes and corrections, I believe that generally speaking, we can better address the needs and experiences of our urban students by shifting our focus toward the local. Perhaps this will mean adjusting our syllabi to include more writing that expresses and illuminates the relationships of urban dwellers to their particular regional and local environments, and creating more course assignments that encourage genuine connections with those environments. Perhaps it will mean teaching canonical American nature writing with an increased sensitivity to the bridges that must be built to span the gap that often separates urban students from a romantic or pastoral conception of the natural world. Perhaps it will mean taking our students and ourselves into the immediate field, where we might share direct experience of the natural world we talk and write and read so much about, where we might observe our particular place more carefully, and viscerally filter the subject of environmental literature through our lungs, be it ever so sweet or foul in our particular neighborhood.

Of course, there are many ways to address the issues and problems I've discussed here. Whatever else we do, however, it is clear to me that teachers of nature writing must actively seek ways to engage urban experience and the many pressing environmental issues affecting urban lives, the same lives which, as the environmental justice movement has so clearly demonstrated, tend to suffer disproportionately as environmental problems make their way downstream, downwind, and down the economic strata.