

Is All Writing Environmental Writing?

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## *Is All Writing Environmental Writing?*

WE are in the midst of the planet's sixth great extinction, in a time where we are seeing the direct effects of radical global climate change via more frequent and ferocious storms, hotter drier years accompanied by more devastating wildfires, snow where there didn't used to be snow, and less snow where permafrost used to be a given. Yet some people prefer to maintain categories for what counts as environmental writing and what is historical writing or social criticism or biography and so on. I can't compartmentalize my attentions. If an author chooses *not* to engage with what we often call the natural world, that very disengagement makes a statement about the author's relationship with her environment; even indifference to the environment directly affects the world about which a writer might purport to be indifferent. We live in a time when making decisions about how we construct the products and actions of our daily lives—whether or not to buy plastic water bottles and drinking straws, or cosmetics with microbeads that make our skin glow—means making decisions about being complicit in compromising the Earth's ecosystems.

What we decide matters in literature is connected to what we decide will matter for our history, for our pedagogy, for our culture. What we do and do not value in our art reveals what we do and do not value in our times. What we leave *off* the page often speaks as loudly as what we include.

I could choose among several paths walking from school to my childhood home in the Southern California hills. Route One was the most direct as the crow flies. It involved the fewest inclines but required a precarious scuffle down a pathless embankment to get to the greenbelt attached to the cul-de-sac where we lived. Route Two involved an initial ascent, then a level walk along

the street where Jeff Blumenthal kenneled the Dobermans he often sicced on my sister and me. Running from the dogs was complicated by the steep stairs leading down to the greenbelt that separated our streets; this should have been the easiest way home, but we avoided it whenever we could. Route Three had no dogs, no stairs, no embankments, and no greenbelts, but it was significantly longer, ending with a climb up a three-block road that had *hill* in its name.

We also had a fourth option. We could climb beyond Jeff Blumenthal's cul-de-sac and into the foothills that backed both his house and ours. In the hills, we walked along drainage canals and animal paths, avoiding our suburban streets and the heavily irrigated strips of park dividing them. We climbed down, finally, over chaparral shrubs and scraggly anti-erosion landscaping, directly into our own back yard. Our parents didn't like us to take this route because we sometimes ran into coyotes or rattlesnakes, but I preferred the risk of the improbable encounter with a rattlesnake to the surety of Jeff Blumenthal's Dobermans. On that little-traveled path, I was free from the tensions of my built environment. I could be like the landscape in the hills beyond our house—a little wild and moderately protected.

Aggressively trained Dobermans, sun-lazy rattlesnakes, green turf in a desert, and ice plant clusters to keep serrated foothills from sliding over newly constructed neighborhoods represented the thin divide between the natural world and our built environments. When one world impinged upon the other, my daily life was directly affected.

When I began to write, words and images sourced from my childhood's landscape became part of what and how I wrote:

*Language*

Silence is one part of speech, the war cry  
of wind down a mountain pass another.  
A stranger's voice echoing through lonely  
valleys, a lover's voice rising so close  
it's your own tongue: these are keys to cipher,  
the way the high hawk's key unlocks the throat  
of the sky and the coyote's yip knocks  
it shut, the way the aspens' bells conform  
to the breeze while the rapids' drums define  
resistance. Sage speaks with one voice, pinyon  
with another. Rock, wind her hand, water

her brush, spells and then scatters her demands.  
 Some notes tear and pebble our paths. Some notes  
 gather: the bank we map our lives around.\*

“Language” was the first poem in my first book. This seems as right a decision about order as I’ve ever made.

Environment is a set of circumstances as mundane as the choice of paths we take to get home. When I lived in Iowa City for my final years of high school, our main routes home—in a car now, because we lived eight miles from school—involved either the interstate and a major thoroughfare, or the back roads that led through farmland and patches of prairie.

On recent visits to the Midwest I’ve driven through ghost landscapes—less prairie, less farmland. Memory overlaid my vision, inscribing alternative realities onto the present, making me aware of where I was within the context of where I have been.

Isn’t this one of the things we do when we sit down to write? We decide how to describe what we are compelled to describe. Even while moving through vast cities like LA or Chicago, by being attuned to a world that is more than simply human I can’t help but think of what might have been there before we privileged our own interests: commerce and industry, asphalt and glass. In this way we can apprehend what might have disappeared and what still lives alongside us, biding time—ginkgos, catfish, the rivers, crickets.

Looking out my office windows where I live now in Northern Colorado, I see the foothills of the Rocky Mountains on most days, and the actual Rockies on really clear ones. People in Fort Collins navigate by those mountains—which are to the west, and so, except on about five overcast days a year, you always know just where you are. The mountains are a constant guide. Consider how different this topographical navigation is from an orientation based on your proximity to a particular building, to a particular street—South of Houston, or SoHo, for instance—or navigation by some other man-made landmark—east of Central Park. Here I’m using references from New York City, the environment of my husband’s youth; for him, thinking to navigate by nonhuman landmarks took a little time. Similarly, “Two streets down from the Waffle House,” we might have said in the Virginia town where I once lived, or “Just after the entrance to the college,” or, “We’re the house with the blue trim.

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\*From *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* (Red Hen Press, 2006).

If you reach the Church of Life, you've gone too far." In such urban environments, it might be difficult to remember that you are, in fact, *in* an "environment," given that we've come to think of the terms *environment* and *nature* as referring to someplace wild and nonhuman, more akin to the foothills of my childhood than to the cul-de-sacs terraced into their sides. But that line of reasoning slides us toward the compartmentalization I resist. Our environments are always both human and other than human.

I feel an affinity for what ecologists call ecotones, areas at the margins between one zone and another—like the tidal zone where beach and ocean overlap, or the treed and grassy band where forest becomes meadow—spaces that are often robustly productive and alive. These are overlaps rich with possibility and also, often, danger. The margins of one biologically robust area and another are sometimes called conflict zones, because the clash between one way of living on the Earth and another can be violent and charged. They are spaces that reward study, revealing diverse possibilities for what it might mean to be alive.

Writing takes off for me when I stop separating human experiences from the realities of the greater-than-human world. A poem that at first seems to have everything to do with some so-called environmental concern might end up being about some human condition, or I might begin a poem thinking about some human concern and end up writing something that's chock full of natural imagery. The connection I feel to experiences that are beyond my own, beyond simply the human, causes me to fuzz the lines.

In a radical and radicalizing way, these fuzzed lines bring me face to face with the fragility of the Holocene—or, more precisely, the destructiveness of the Anthropocene. To build an age around the concerns of one species is to ignore the delicate balance required in any ecotone. When one way of living on the Earth takes priority, the overlaps that support a healthy system of exchange collapse. Without that exchange, one path becomes the only path, and so whatever dangers were inherent on that one route cannot be avoided, because whatever possibilities were available on the others can no longer be revealed. I do not want such a limiting set of circumstances for my writing or for the literature of our time. I certainly don't want such a limiting set of circumstances for my world.

In 2009, when *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* was published, one of the most remarkable statements the book made was that black people could write with an empathetic eye toward the natural world. In

the general public perception of black writers, the idea that we can write out of a deep connection to the environment—and have done so for at least four centuries—came, and I think still comes, as a shock.

As the editor of *Black Nature*, I was able to make the anthology a complete project by expanding the presentation of how people write about the environment. Not all the poems in the anthology are of the rapturous *I walk out into nature and find myself* ilk, though such poems *are* there. The history of African Americans in this country complicates their ability and/or desire to write of a rapturous idealized connection to the natural world—as when I have driven over the Tallahatchee River and had my knowledge of history, of the murder of Emmett Till, make it impossible for me to view those often-quite-scenic waters in a purely appreciative manner. And so, many of the poems in the collection do not fall in line with the praise school of nature poetry but, instead, reveal complicated—often deadly—relationships. The authors of these works mix their visions of landscapes and animals into investigations of history, economics, resource extraction, and other very human and deeply perilous concerns.

In complicating or “de-pristining”—I’m patenting that word—my environmental imagination, I engage with what has come to be called *ecopoetics*, connecting topics we often understand to be the provenance of nature poetry with topics about our current and past human lives. In doing so, *ecopoetics* has expanded the parameters of who is writing environmental work, and how. This mode of creating and understanding poetry is expanding our ideas about the very nature of what constitutes environmental writing.

Writers exploring *ecopoetics* ask themselves questions such as these: How does climate change affect our poetics? How do we write about resource extraction, agribusiness, endangered bird species, the removals of indigenous peoples, suburban sprawl, the lynching of blacks, or the precarious condition of gray wolves and the ecosystems dependent upon them? Our contemporary understanding of *ecopoetics* takes into account the ways human-centered thinking reflects on, and is reflected in, what we write. And, contemporary *ecopoetics* questions the efficacy of valuing one physical presentation of animated matter over another, because narratives about place and about life contribute to our orientation in, and our interpretation of, that place and that life.

All of our positions on the planet are precarious at this moment in history, and attentive writers work to articulate why this is the case—including

many writers of color who were already engaging in this mode of writing long before the ecopoetics movement took off. (Works by Alice Dunbar Nelson, Lucille Clifton, Claude McKay, Anne Spencer, Sterling Brown, June Jordan, Evie Shockley, Sean Hill, and Ed Roberson spring immediately to mind.) But only as the ecopoetics movement gained traction has such de-pristined writing finally been identified as environmental writing and, therefore, begun to be seen in a new light.

Without giving myself license to believe that all writing is environmental writing, I could very likely assign expansive poems—including many of those anthologized in *Black Nature*—to just about any category other than that of a nature poem. But to separate the importance of human interactions with the non-human world from the importance of cultural and political considerations would be to limit the scope of such poems entirely. This is particularly true given that the black body has so frequently been rendered “animalistic” and “wild” in the most dangerously degrading and limiting senses of those terms.

According to what Jeff Blumenthal yelled at us as he commanded the attacks, he sicced his dogs on us because we were black girls and, in his mind, beneath him. Hearing all the names he assigned to my body, so many of them intended to limit my potential, I quickly learned the danger of categorical labels. Never mind all the things Jeff Blumenthal and my sister and I might have had in common; our differences were enough to cause him to be indifferent toward our safety. He was hostile toward our presence in a space he considered his own. So, walking the easy path home from school was often nearly impossible.

The history of human divisions is often constituted of stories about one set of people being hostile toward the presence of others. An ideology that would demand the exclusion or subjugation of whole populations of human beings is an ideology quick to assume positions of superiority over all that is perceived to be different. If you can construct a narrative that turns a human into a beast in order to justify the degradation of that human, how much easier must it be to dismiss the needs of a black bear, a crayfish, a banyan? The values we place on lives that are not our own are reflected in the stories we tell ourselves—and in which aspects of these stories resonate with us. To separate the concerns of the human world (politics, history, commerce) from those of the many life forms with which humans share this planet strikes me as disas-

trous hubris and folly. We live in community with all the other lives on Earth, whether we acknowledge this or not. When we write about our lives, we ought to do so with an awareness of the other lives we encounter as we move through the world. I choose to honor these lives with attention and compassion.