Hello and welcome to Urgent Wonder: the Practice and Paradox of Environmental Writing. I am Ana Maria Spagna. I'll be moderating the discussion today.

You can read about the panelists' amazing achievements as writers, but since we're talking about teaching today, we'll start by introducing ourselves as teachers, what exactly we teach and where.

I'll give a brief overview of the topic, then I'll ask each of the panelists a specific question most related to their work.

We'll go around once more and each offer three specific practical tips for approaching environmental writing in the classroom no matter what you teach.

No later than 1:10 we'd like to open the floor for Q&A.

Again, I'm Ana Maria Spagna

I teach creative nonfiction in the low residency MFA at Antioch University, Los Angeles, in the nature writing MFA at Western Colorado University, and I currently serve as Viebranz Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at St. Lawrence where I teach creative nonfiction, nature and environmental writing, and a course called "Embodying the Nonhuman."

So I teach broadly: graduate students and undergraduates, mostly creative nonfiction, though also cross-genre and often, but not always, with an explicit environmental focus. In the past, I've also taught through outdoor programs, churches, libraries, conferences, and annually in a one-room school to 1st through 8th graders.

***Everyone: Introduce yourselves and what/where you teach**

I have a wild passion for the outdoors, for nonhuman animals, for rocks, sky, water, and also for people, for social justice. I want to write to celebrate all of these things and I want to write to save all of it, all of us, from ecological crises. I believe it's nothing less than a sacred task, and I'm grateful to get to do it … but it is hard.

Nature writing is steeped in troubling traditions: patriarchy, the primacy of science, the colonialist project, racism, and ableism. Just to name a few. We must actively work to subvert and dismantle these legacies. And that's not all.

One day, a year or so ago, in class – Nature & Enviro writing – a student submitted a terrific essay about a day of backcountry skiing. She wrote about the challenge of it, the joy, about avalanches and ermine. For revision, I gently urged her, as I often do, and as a backcountry skier myself, to engage with the ironies and challenges of the sport: how climate change is melting snow, how we contribute to it by driving to these faraway places. She did, and she brought the essay back to workshop. The parts about skiing were still terrific. The parts about climate change were dry and cliché. I know she earnestly tried … but still. When the workshop kept digging at how to make it better, finally she said: "I'm 19. I didn't cause this problem. I don't know how to solve it."

That, in a nutshell, is the problem. For all of us.

I'm not 19. I'm more culpable than my young student, but I don't know how to solve it either—though I can think of ways to start—and in that moment, I fumbled. I didn't exactly know how to justify or enliven what I was asking her to do. I decided to gather some smart friends to brainstorm, and here we are.

How do we inspire students to write both wonder and urgency? What are the best approaches? Where are the models?

Let's dig in …

Laura - How do we focus not on loss—though bearing witness is important too—but also kindle energy and options to envision a better world-to-come? How do "prospective survivors" get made, those who are honest enough to imagine and face the worst, but, importantly, follow up with action and energy?

Laura's reply - Prospective survivors, def'n:
https://www.outsideonline.com/culture/essays-culture/climate-change-love-stories-fiction-books/
Erica Berry:

From *Gen Dread*, a newsletter by Dr. Britt Wray, who investigates the disproportionate ways the climate crisis affects young people's mental states and offers ideas for strengthening emotional resilience. In a recent post: "a prospective survivor is someone who vividly imagines how they might perish and gets shaken to the core by its haunting [e]effect." Crucially, a prospective survivor does not surrender to a doomsday future. She does not subscribe to what climate justice

writer Mary Annaïse-Hegler calls the "deluded belief that this world has ever been perfect and that, therefore, and therefore, an imperfect version of it is not worth saving, or fighting for." A prospective survivor lets herself catastrophize and then kicks herself into action. Because she has imagined what she can lose, she knows what she is working to save."

Here are 10 ways I think we foster that, from global to small:

1. Most fundamentally as a human: meet where at and lift.

2. Most fundamentally as citizen of planet earth: Honest discussions of how hard it is to convey the seriousness of climate chaos, knowing it's notoriously hard to write about.

3. Most globally as a teacher: Education on approaches and craft – what's happening *now* – ie, the difference between advocacy writing versus lyric writing, the evolution of nature writing, the techniques of fiction and nonfiction and poetry.

4. The need for new stories. Imaginative stories. Brave stories. True stories. Complex stories. Stories that embrace our problematic history. Stories that fashion new narratives about ecological wisdom and compassion for the planet and the future.

How it presents in the classroom:
(readings, writings, workshop, publishing, modeling, inspiring)

5. Readings – those that balance honest assessment with hope – and fitting it into the curriculum in the first place.

6. Writing - Solutions-based journalism, for example.

7. Workshop – creating honest and safe space

8. Publishing: Application of writing to real world, now.

9. Model it.

10. Inspire, which circles back to the lift.

Derek - What readings/resources/assignments have been the most effective at engaging your students in environmental issues?

Nicole - What about utilizing Hyperobjects? Do we have to try to represent the whole through metonym or synecdoche?

Nicole's reply:

Timothy Morton names climate change a "hyperobject"—which Morton defines as "an entity of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that it defeats traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place.[i]" Humans cannot wrap their minds around the enormity of the planet, its numerous species, its billions of interconnected relationships, the rate of geological change, the rate of anthropogenic change. The nearly-impossible-to-conceive big numbers that climate change engenders forces us to flatten, or even discount the idea because we cannot conceive of the fantastically large number of carbon parts or the sheer amount of carbon the ocean must store. We have to resist making the story easy, resist flattening it into one cure-all response or one there's-nothing-to-be-done-about-it story. We must embrace all the stories we can muster.

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in *The Danger of a Single Story* , a popular Ted Talk, narrates example after example about how one version of a story can quash others. As a child, she read books about kids with blond hair and blue eyes whose primary fruit was apples. Thus, at first, she wrote books about kids with blond hair and blue eyes who ate apples. It wasn't until she was introduced to books written by Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye that she understood how many stories existed and could exist—ones with kids who eat mangoes instead of apples. One story is dangerous. "But to insist on the negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me," Adichie says. The numbers, as absurdly abundant as they may be, each deserve their own story.

Metonym and synecdoche are my favorite ways to imagine climate change (if favorite is a word one wants to use with climate change) because it means we have the opportunity to pay attention to every little thing and to write a million, no, a billion, stories that say hey, look at this. And this. And this. It calls two important clarions—that this planet is so bountiful and beautiful and to please, see what you can say about keeping it that way.

[1] Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* University of Minnesota Press, 2013. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/book/27131.

C Marie - What about re-imaging "science"? How do we re-educate ourselves that we may teach traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and through a nature-centric lens in a way that seems neither appropriated nor othering?

CMarie's reply: Berkes and colleagues define traditional ecological knowledge as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment. As a knowledge–practice–belief complex, traditional ecological knowledge includes the religious traditions of a society. It is both cumulative and dynamic, building on experience and adapting to changes. It is an attribute of societies with historical continuity in resource use on a particular land. By and large, these are non-industrial or less technologically oriented societies, many of them indigenous or tribal, but not exclusively so. Traditional ecological knowledge is a subset of indigenous knowledge, generally defined as local knowledge held by indigenous peoples or local knowledge unique to a given culture or society. https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/earth-and-planetary-sciences/traditional-ecological-knowledge

I encourage you, if interested, to learn more about TEK and TK, particularly relating to the tribes in your area.

Traditional Ecological Learning

A lesson we can learn from TEK (as well as Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Traditional Knowledge) is the practice of acquiring knowledge in a Traditional/Indigenous way. This is also something we can share with our students, to make them ecological knowledge keepers in their spaces as well.

Relationship

How are we meeting the non-human? How do we interact?

How do we create a relationship with the nonhuman?

Reverse the roles of teacher and student

See the non-human as equal

Non recreational

Attention/Wonder

Get to know the non-human by observation

Gather knowledge in your own way: through your culture, senses, traditions

Stifle the need to add knowledge that you do not already possess – at least for a time

Story/Transformation

Seek transformation not transaction

Pass along the knowledge in story, song, poem, movie

Celebrate

Ceremony

Simple definition of cultural appropriation:

Cultural appropriation takes place **when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group for their own monetary, personal, and/or professional gain—especially when done in a stereotypical, disrespected, exploitative way.**

*** Everyone: What are your three most practical tips?**

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