The Environment Knows No Borders: Environmental Literature, Public Awareness, and Opportunities for International Collaboration

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The Timeliness of this Topic

• The latest issue (May/June 08) of NAFSA’s journal *International Educator* features a cover story titled “(Not So) Glacial Changes” on climate change as a “perfect opportunity for international education collaboration”; author Nicole Branan quotes international environmental policy professor William Moomaw from Tufts University, who states that “‘In some sense [climate change] is the perfect international issue. With respect to resource and energy security […], we are all pretty much linked together. There are very few places in the world that can produce all of their own energy without engaging in international trade.’ And global cooperation will be essential to solve the problem, he added.” (48)

This is true of all environmental fields, not just climate studies
My goals in this brief talk

• To introduce the vast field of environmental literature, a prominent branch of environmental studies--and a field of rapidly growing global interest among scholars, students, and policy-makers.

• To reinforce the idea that environmental studies represents one of the cutting edges of international education today.

• And to ask your advice regarding the ongoing process of supporting the world-wide growth of this discipline.
Outline: The Environment Knows No Borders

• Brief definitions of environmental literature and ecological literary criticism
• Several brief examples of environmental literature
• Philosophical and practical reasons for borderlessness
• The history of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)--the international expansion of the field
• Recent international collaborations
• How can international educators help this important field?
Some preliminary questions (for you)

• What are the most effective ways of introducing emerging disciplines to students and teachers throughout the world? (Or, how do scholars find out about important fields they may not yet have heard of?)

• What might be done to recruit diverse international students (including non-native English speakers) to American graduate programs in the environmental humanities (history, literature, philosophy, etc.) and in environmental studies more generally?

• Are there models for short-term certificate programs or low-residency M.A. or Ph.D. programs that have been particularly successful for U.S. institutions and for international students?

• What general suggestions do you have for me (after you listen to the kind of work that I do)?
Environmental Literature: A Planetary Definition

- Human expression (often in poetic or narrative modes) that seeks to explore the complex layers of relationship that give meaning to our lives and guide our behavior (including the relationship between our own species and the larger planet).

Nigerian nature poet Niyi Osundare, reading in the French Pyrenees, October 2007
Subgenres of Environmental Literature

- **Nature poetry** (also sometimes called “ecopoetry” or by specialized terms such as “sustainable poetry”): prominent American nature poets include A.R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, John Daniel, Robert Frost, Robert Hass, Robinson Jeffers, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver, Pattiann Rogers, Gary Snyder, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and many others. International nature poets of great distinction include Homero Aridjis (Mexico) and Judith Wright (Australia)—there are innumerable others.

- **Ecofiction** (also sometimes “environmental fiction”): distinguished American writers of ecofiction include Rudolfo Anaya, Ana Castillo, Willa Cather, David James Duncan, Ernest Hemingway, Linda Hogan, Toni Morrison, Louis Owens, Leslie Marmon Silko, John Edgar Wideman, etc. Particularly popular international writers of environmental fiction include John Fowles (England), Anacristina Rossi (Costa Rica), and Tim Winton (Australia), etc.

- **Nature writing** (also sometimes called “nonfiction nature writing” or “natural history”): there are dozens and dozens of important practitioners of this genre, including Henry David Thoreau, John Burroughs, John Muir, Mary Austin, Henry Beston, Aldo Leopold, Joseph Wood Krutch, Wallace Stegner, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, Terry Tempest Williams, Sandra Steingraber, and David Gessner. International writers of notable repute include Michiko Ishimure (Japan), Wei An (China), and Arundhati Roy (India).

- Other genres include **environmental drama, green film (part of “green popular culture,” including music), and oral narratives**. This literature exists in all cultures, during all periods of history.
A Few Overviews

- My own introductions to the field (selected from 150 articles and 15 books) include *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez* (1992), the forthcoming *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* (September 2008--forthcoming from U of Nevada P and Beijing UP), and the article “Speaking a Word for Nature: Voices of Environmental Literature,” *Environment* (March 1999)--the article summarizes the field of American environmental literature and is available online.

- A quick web search will identify numerous additional books in the field, such as Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Joni Adamson’s *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism* (2001), and Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* (2004).

- Many new studies (and samples of environmental writing are available in the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*). For more information, see the website for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE): www.asle.umn.edu
A Few Basic Definitions of Ecocriticism
(ecological literary criticism)


... the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world. (xviii)


... the study of literature “as if the earth mattered.” (1)
A few samples of nature poetry and some contexts of international discussion

- Robinson Jeffers, “Oh, Lovely Rock” (1937), a meditation on “mutability” and the meaning of stone for humans, which can be read in the context of the contemporary global trade in stone.

- Ofelia Zepeda, “It Is Going to Rain” (1997), a reflection on the sacred importance of water to desert peoples (and implicitly to all life), which can be understood as a defense of the validity of local knowledge of nature.
We stayed the night in the pathless gorge of Ventana Creek, up the east fork.
The rock walls and the mountain ridges hung forest on forest above our heads, maple and redwood, laurel, oak, madrone, up to the high and slender Santa Lucian firs that stare up the cataracts of slide-rock to the star-color precipices.

We lay on gravel and kept a little camp-fire for warmth.
Past midnight only two or three coals glowed red in the cooling darkness; I laid a clutch of dead bay-leaves on the ember ends and felted dry sticks across them and lay down again. The revived flame lighted my sleeping son’s face and his companion’s, and the vertical face of the great gorge-wall across the stream. Light leaves overhead danced in the fire’s breath, tree-trunks were seen: it was the rock wall that fascinated my eyes and mind. Nothing strange: light-gray diorite with
two or three slanting seams in it,
Smooth-polished by the endless attrition of slides and floods; no fern nor
lichen, pure naked rock … as if I were
Seeing rock for the first time. As if I were seeing through the flame-lit
surface into the real and bodily
And living rock. Nothing strange … I cannot
Tell you how strange: the silent passion, the deep nobility and childlike
loveliness: this fate going on
Outside our fates. It is here in the mountain like a grave smiling child. I
shall die, and my boys
Will live and die, our world will go on through its rapid agonies of change and
discovery; this age will die,
And wolves have howled in the snow around a new Bethlehem: this rock will be
here, grave, earnest, not passive: the energies
That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole mountain above: and I
many packed centuries ago,
Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this lonely rock.
(*Wild God* 163)
I’ve presented “Oh, Lovely Slab: Robinson Jeffers, Stone Work, and the Locus of the Real” on numerous occasions in the U.S. and overseas.
A brief example of environmental literature suggesting the importance of life’s most common element: water


Someone said it is going to rain.
I think it is not so.
Because I have not yet felt the earth and the way it holds still in anticipation.
I think it is not so.
Because I have not yet felt the sky become heavy with moisture of preparation.
I think it is not so.
Because I have not yet felt the winds move with their coolness.
I think it is not so.
Because I have not yet inhaled the sweet, wet dirt the winds bring.
So, there is no truth that it will rain.

The speaker’s refined knowledge of “her” physical environment and passionate concern for water/rain inspire readers to take to heart the importance of water to the sustaining of life/culture.
A Recent International Collaboration in the Study of Water Literature

- The April 2008 publication of the journal *Concentric* (National Taiwan Normal University), guest co-edited by scholars from the U.S., Italy, and Japan and with contributions by literary scholars and journalists from India, Turkey, Lebanon, Estonia, Italy, Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

The modern world is in some ways a dialogue between oil and water. Water makes life possible, while oil is toxic to most life. Water in its pure state is clear [...]. Water dissolves [...]. Water has inspired great poetry and literature. Our language is full of allusions to springs, currents, rivers, seas, rain, mist, dew, and snowfall. To a great extent our language is about water and people in relation to water. (54).

Water should be part of every school curriculum [...]. Water as part of our mythology, history, politics, culture, and society should be woven throughout curriculum, K through PhD. (58)
Is water a local phenomenon? Is anything in nature “merely local”?


States often draw their borders along rivers, yet that is false to the land because rivers join rather than divide their two shores. My rumpled neighborhood in southern Indiana has more to do with the hill country across the river in Kentucky than it does with the glacial plains of northern Indiana. Nature ignores our political boundaries. Birds migrate up and down the valleys, seeds ride the currents, plants colonize outward from the banks, and all manner of beasts—including humans—seek homes and food and one another along the paths of rivers. A true map of our continent would show a pattern of curving watersheds stitched together along high ridges, like a paisley fabric. (61-62)
Name a single environmental phenomenon or issue that is uniquely local

- Deforestation?
- Biodiversity and extinction?
- Desertification? Flooding?
- Overpopulation? Crowding? Urban sprawl?
- Pollution?
- Energy efficiency (and the effects of inefficiency)?
- Privatization of resources--water, seeds, land, etc.?
All are global issues, requiring global awareness (of governments, corporations, and the public) and global cooperation.
Is globalization good or bad?
Yes--both


Globalization should hold great promise, but that promise is not being realized today, nor will it be unless globalization is consciously managed for people and for the environment. If the world wishes to evolve toward an international economy, and it certainly seems to, it will need to develop an international polity equal to the challenge of governing its newly global economy. (147)
A brief overview of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE)

- Founded in 1992 in Reno, Nevada, USA
- Publishes *ASLE News* and *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*
- Currently 1,000 members in the U.S. (another 1,000 abroad)
- First international branch founded in Japan in 1994
- Currently branches exist in the U.S., Japan, the U.K., South Korea, Australia/New Zealand, Canada, Europe (multinational), India (two branches), and Taiwan
- Scholars and writers are working in this field on every continent, but the field is emerging slowly in Africa, Latin America, and other regions of the developing world, where it is especially needed

Several of the founders of ASLE-Japan attending a planning meeting at Ryoanji (temple), Kyoto, February 1994
A brief introduction to the Graduate Program in Literature and Environment (English Dept), University of Nevada, Reno

- Established in 1996
- Four core faculty members (and eight additional faculty members--just within English)
- Between twenty and thirty M.A. and Ph.D. students in the program each year
- International participants (to date): Austria (1 Ph.D.), Canada (1 Ph.D.), China (1 Ph.D., 3 visiting profs), India (1 Ph.D., 2 visiting profs), Italy (2 M.A.), Japan (3 M.A., 3 Ph.D., 1 visiting prof), South Korea (1 Ph.D., 7 visiting profs), Sweden (1 visiting prof), Taiwan (1 Ph.D., 2 visiting profs), U.K. (1 M.A.)
- This is the world’s major graduate program in environmental literature and ecocriticism
Think!--the splendor of our life: bicycle poetry and sustainable transportation


I listen, and the mountain lakes
hear snowflakes come on those winter wings
only the owls are awake to see,
their radar gaze and furred ears
alert. In that stillness a meaning shakes;

And I have thought (maybe alone on my bike, quaintly on a cold evening pedaling home) think!—
the splendor of our life, its current unknown
as those mountains, the scene no one sees.

Oh citizens of our great amnesty:
we might have died. We live. Marvels
cost by, great veers and swoops of air
so bright the lamps waver in tears,
and I hear in the chain a chuckle I like to hear. (Smoke’s Way 29)
Not diminishment, but an opportunity to *register* sensation

Stafford celebrates the essential perceptibility of the world—and the world’s own alertness to perception—that comes to him by way of the act of bicycling alone on a wintery evening. Far from the sense of diminishment that ordinary citizens might associate with the act of biking home after work rather than driving an automobile, the “quaint” (old-fashioned) activity of riding a bike becomes an opportunity to really think, to *register*, the feeling of “the splendor of our life.” The way Stafford says “our life” rather than “our lives” implies that we are all in this life together—that even though he might be “alone on his bike,” he experiences an overwhelming sense of life’s magic that envelops and includes all beings.

I listen, and the mountain lakes hear snowflakes come on those winter wings only the owls are awake to see, their radar gaze and furred ears alert. In that stillness a meaning shakes;

And I have thought (maybe alone on my bike, quaintly on a cold evening pedaling home) think!—the splendor of our life, its current unknown as those mountains, the scene no one sees.
Taking to Heart Sustainability
(and the Poetry of Sustainability)

Oh citizens of our great amnesty: we might have died. We live. Marvels coast by, great veers and swoops of air so bright the lamps waver in tears, and I hear in the chain a chuckle I like to hear.

Reading this poem makes me want to get on my own bicycle in pursuit not only of ordinary transportation, but in an effort to perceive the “meaning [that] shakes” in the still, cold air through which the pedaling poet moves and also in an effort to achieve the friendly bond with technology indicated in the poem, which concludes by mentioning with powerful repetition “I hear in the [bike’s] chain a chuckle I like to hear.” This work powerfully illustrates the kind of language that makes it possible for the general public to take to heart the messages of sustainability.
Sometimes scholars “speak to the choir”—and sometimes we find new choirs to address

International conference on eco-poetry, Qingyuan City (4 million Residents), Guangdong Province, China, 18 May 2008
One may root for the bicycles, but it seems obvious that they are going to lose to the cars eventually, just as horses and pedestrians lost out generations ago in American cities. One may argue that China is mad to make this choice, that it should be patiently building railroads and urban mass transit systems instead. […]

China has chosen cars, and so have the Chinese people who can afford them, for approximately the same reasons Americans love the automobile. These machines deliver real value to the human experience: speed and comfort, saved time and effort, the individuality of choice, and status.

The nightmare, of course, is the prospect of a China whose 1.2 billion citizens will someday be prosperous enough to consume automobiles at the same rate as do people in advanced countries. At present, China has 680 people per private automobile; the United States has 1.7 people per car. Could the world survive such progress? If not, who must give up their cars, the Chinese or the Americans? The answer seems obvious to the rest of the world. (William Greider, “One World of Consumers,” Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Ed. Roger Rosenblatt [1999] 30)
Stopping (or slowing) the human “express train”

Contemporary Chinese poet Hua Hai, from “The Red Light on the Cliffs” (trans. by Zhang Bigui):

[…] Because you are the world
The world is you
Your Express is so powerful
That it doesn’t care it has crashed my light
The trees, the birds, all the other creatures and I
Have to stand on the other side of the world […]

Human desire is represented as a powerful “express train” tearing across the surface of the planet. Human beings exaggerate the importance of their own desires, and the poem tries to help us know our proper place in the world.
The feeling of awe [...] is essential for survival

- Poet W.S. Merwin (from a 1988 interview):
  
  If we’re so stupid that we choose to destroy each other and ourselves, that’s bad enough; but if we destroy the whole life on the planet! And I’m not talking about a big bang; I’m talking about it—the destruction of the seas, the destruction of species after species, the destruction of the forests. These are not replaceable. We can’t suddenly decide years down the line that we made a mistake and put it all back. The feeling of awe—something that we seem to be losing—is essential for survival. (Qtd in Scigaj 187)
Exhortation and inspiration--the urgency of environmental literature

• Moral arguments unavoidable at this time in history … but we can (through effective communication):

• Revivify “our relational bond with nature”

• Re-instill ourselves with the “feeling of awe toward the world”
My questions for you again--and a few new ones

• What are the most effective ways of introducing emerging disciplines to students and teachers throughout the world? (Or, how do scholars find out about important fields they may not yet have heard of?)

• What might be done to recruit diverse international students (including non-native English speakers) to American graduate programs in the environmental humanities (history, literature, philosophy, etc.) and environmental studies more generally?

• Are there models for short-term certificate programs or low-residency M.A. or Ph.D. programs that have been particularly successful for U.S. institutions and for international students?

• What general suggestions do you have for me (now that you’ve listened to the kind of work I do)?

• Should international educators (i.e., NAFSA members) be working to advocate new academic directions and new directions in social policy, and, if so, can this be done sometimes by supporting particular academic disciplines in addition to lobbying directly with public officials? (This would appear to be a response to President Egginton’s call for continuing work on behalf of human rights and social justice, wouldn’t it?)