

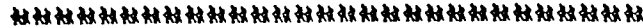
The

AMERICAN NATURE WRITING NEWSLETTER

A Biannual Devoted to the Study of Writing on Nature

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REVIEWS

The Practice of the Wild by Gary Snyder.
North Point Press: San Francisco 1990.

Gary Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* is an amazingly sophisticated yet clear, complex yet uncomplicated, unified book about *knowing how to be* in this world. It is thematically unified by a discussion of the interrelationships of the meanings of freedom and responsibility, wilderness and wildness, humanity and nature, mind and body, conscious and unconscious, and knowledge and action. This is ecological writing in its fullest sense.

"The Etiquette of Freedom," begins with the notion of a "compact" as one of the forms of proper relationships among all entities who cohabit this earth. Snyder then looks at the popular American dream of "wild and free" in terms of people being free only through recognizing the real conditions of existence in which they participate. To realize freedom, Snyder argues, people are going to have to begin to build a civilization that can come to terms with and sustain "wildness." Having worked through the idea of wild ecosystems and the wildness that must be reasserted along with recovering wilderness, Snyder emphasizes in the second chapter the ways in which peoples relate to the land. Snyder believes it is necessary to return to a practice of commons, including the air itself and the oceans.

In "Tawny Grammar" Snyder turns his attention to the manifestations of bioregional practice in terms of the cultural specifics of peoples and what the healthier cultures have in common. The most detailed discussion occurs in relation to the practices of Alaskan peoples who are on the cusp of the transition and conflict between the centralized
(continued on p. 2)

CLASSROOM NOTES

Teaching Wilderness Literature
in the Smoky Mountains

Weldon Reed

Tarrant County Junior College, in Fort Worth, Texas, offers a unique wilderness education program, which presents students with the opportunity to acquire eight hours credit while backpacking into such wilderness areas as the Grand Canyon, the Grand Tetons, Big Bend National Park in southwest Texas, and the Smoky Mountains. The students receive four hours' credit in geology, one hour of physical education credit, and three hours credit in sophomore literature (entitled Wilderness Literature).

The aim of Wilderness Literature is to offer the students physical and intellectual contact with a major aspect of American literature and history--the wilderness experience. They engage in periods of intense physical activity, followed by interludes of reflection, at which time they can review their readings, write in their journals, and participate in discussions held in the field.

TCJC has conducted this program since 1972, and in May 1990 Herb Hudgens, the geology teacher, my wife, his assistant, and I took twenty students to the Smoky Mountains for a twenty-one day excursion. We spent ten days backpacking the Art Loeb trail in the Pisgah National Forest, which begins at Brevard, North Carolina, and ends below Cold Mountain at the Davy Crockett Boy Scouts Camp, near Waynesville, North Carolina.

Beginning approximately two months before departure, the students attend four to six on-campus
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FROM THE EDITORS

The American Nature Writing Newsletter has been a great success. Such a success, in fact, that the shoestring on which we have been happily running for the past two years is becoming frayed. It is time to get ourselves some new shoestrings, and so we are turning to you, our readers, for help. Your contributions will not only cover costs of postage and xeroxing but will also make us environmentally friendlier by paying for recycled paper. Please send contributions of any amount to the address on the coupon inside.

The Fall issue of the Newsletter will be devoted to women writers on the subject of nature. Deadline for submission of short essays, book reviews, and notes about classroom work is October 15, 1991. As usual, material for the Classroom Notes section should be sent to:

L. Thomas Stuckert
English Department
University of Findlay
Findlay, Ohio 45840

Book reviews should be submitted to:

Edward Zlotkowski
English Department
Bentley College
Waltham, Ma 02154-4705

We look forward to hearing from you.

Alicia Nitecki

The *American Nature Writing Newsletter* is published twice a year and contains brief essays, books reviews, classroom notes, and information about activities relating to the study of writing on nature and the environment. Items of interest, including news about conferences, forthcoming publications, and work in progress are welcome. Copies are free to individuals.

Editor: Alicia Nitecki, Bentley College

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(Synder, continued from p. 1)

civilization of the American metropolis and the old ways of tribal societies.

"Good, Wild, Sacred" works through a series of reflections on historical and present day experience. Snyder speaks of the contradiction between an experience, which led him to study Zen in Japan, as well as to return to the United States as the place for his practice.

"The Woman Who Married a Bear" and "Survival and Sacrament" end the volume. Snyder brings together in his first essay tradition and innovation, myth and experience, with a rather popular native tale of intersexuality between humans and other animals. What is revealed here is the power that myth can carry in the present day. "Survival and Sacrament" serves as Snyder's conclusion. It begins on a very ominous note by warning of the terrifying difference between death and the "end to birth." Snyder points out that excessive human generation, particularly in the past three hundred years, is a crucial dimension of the problem of species extinction. He began the volume with the idea of "compact" and ends it with a promise of covenant. That promise begins with the argument that a true human quest "requires embracing the other as oneself" and that a movement in the world is growing that recognizes just such a necessity (180). This necessity takes the form of developing a wilder culture, a "culture of the wilderness" (180). Snyder then closes with a discussion of "Grace," as prayer, which recognizes that "eating is a sacrament" (184). By this emphasis on grace he has returned to the beginning of *The Practice of the Wild* by teaching his readers about a particular form of the "etiquette of freedom," one which recognizes and gratefully affirms human responsibility.

This volume is the most developed example of ecological writing available to us at this time. I predict that it will to a large extent become the benchmark against which future environmental and nature writing will be measured to determine whether it continues to accept the romantic notion of human alienation or engages in a process of dealienating humanity from the rest of nature instead.

Patrick D. Murphy, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

(Teaching, continued from p. 1)

seminars on the literature requirements. At these meetings, they are given handouts about the course, background information, and titles of the required texts which are to be read before leaving on the trip. In addition, these seminars include discussion time and question-and-answer periods to assist the students in their preparations. I also show two different Outward Bound films, *B.J. and Eddie*, and *The Journey*, which demonstrate the physical rigors involved during such courses and the group consciousness demanded.

There are specific objectives to the course, especially to the literature component. We take students to an immense outdoor laboratory for studies that will contribute to a fuller knowledge and a better understanding of the wilderness and of man's relation to it. By exposing students to the wilderness, we allow the wilderness to instruct them. Because we provide the students with rigorous and exciting physical challenges, such as backpacking, rock climbing (the non-dangerous type), and stream and log crossing, they can observe themselves in a fresh and revealing manner and sense the feelings of those who have written about the wilderness more acutely than they might have done otherwise. A last objective of the course is to provide the students with a sense of intense community often possible only under adverse and strenuous circumstances, as expressed in much of wilderness literature.

I required students to read five books: *Out Under the Sky of the Great Smokies*, by Harvey Broome; *Deliverance* by James Dickey; *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold; *Snow-Bound Six*, by Richard Martin Sterne, and *At Home in the Woods*, by Vena and Brad Angier.

Grades were determined by three requirements: group discussion and participation, including cooperation with the rest of the group and performing required tasks around the camp; a daily journal in which they were asked to write freely for at least thirty minutes a day about their observations, feelings, and reflections on the readings and on their physical experiences; a final examination administered two days before our arrival home, and written after their last journal entry. In the handouts I had given to them during the on-campus seminars, I had included identification passages from each book and possible essay questions about the reading. These handouts

encouraged them to read attentively, guided them to the main themes, aided the group discussions, and raised the level of achievement on the exam.

The wilderness education program enables the students to gain a clearer, and more meaningful, understanding of wilderness literature than they could ever obtain in the classroom. These twenty-one students have become true disciples of the wilderness, individuals who are self-reliant and who advocate Thoreau's call to simplify their lives. They have developed love and concern for the wilderness and now have the knowledge to speak out on its behalf. As one student said in his journal, "All of the things we saw have given us a chance to understand life and our responsibility to preserve these features and activities for future generations."

Tarrant County Junior College

The Center for Great Plains Studies will devote its 16th annual interdisciplinary symposium (April 8-10,



1992) to the topic: "Exploring the Great Plains: Continuing the Columbian Legacy." Submit proposals of 150-200 words (and a brief resume) by July 1, 1991, to Professor Gary E. Moulton, Center for Great Plains Studies, 1213 Oldfather Hall, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68588-0314. (Tel. 402/472-3082).

The 26th annual meeting of the Western Literature Association will take place in Estes Park, CO, this fall (October 3-5, 1991). Complete papers, including 200-word abstracts and stamped, self-addressed reply cards, must be submitted by June 28 to Professor James Work, Department of English, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523. Topics of special interest include Colorado and regional writers of the past and present; nature writing and environmental topics in literature.

Weber State University will host the 4th North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference, February 13-15, 1992. Please send submissions or inquiries to Professor L. M. Vause, Department of English, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408 by December 1, 1991.



Ecofeminism and the Other

Natalie Dandekar, Ph.D.

In the last column, I wrote

"Ecofeminists consciously recognize that it is the same mistaken presumption of alienation, of treating the other (whether it be woman or nature) as resource, and means to be used and even used up in the pursuit of some (privileged, male) end, which underlies the wrongs which distort our human life chances and ultimately threaten to destroy us all, and at no great distance in time."

In this column, I'd like to explore the concept of otherness and its place in ecofeminist theory in greater detail.

To be other: as used above, the other is treated as resource by the culturally empowered. In post-industrial capitalism to be other is thus to be liable to exploitation because what is other is also characterized as inferior, lacking intrinsic worth sufficient to command respect. The rhetoric of the culturally empowered generally locates the sources of value sufficient to command respect as being human, but reflection shows that to do so this rhetoric falsely universalize the characteristics of the (privileged, male) group, considering them to be somehow essential species characteristics. Those who obviously belong to the human species, but nonetheless possess characteristics not thus canonically valorized become defined as not quite fully human, and therefore as Other than fully human, even to themselves. (Spelman and Lugones have labelled the phenomenon "cultural imperialism."¹) From the perspective of the cultural imperialist, as well as from the perspective developed by those dominated by the theories of cultural imperialism, to belong to a culturally exploited group by virtue of ethnic identity, religion, gender or other forms of identifiable difference is both to be denied fully human status, and to be forced to consider oneself as Other than simply human where conceptually otherness has come to be understood as the less worthy of respect/the legitimate object of exploitation and use.

However, Otherness has an equally fundamental alternative meaning. The numinous, the spiritual experience of the Sacred and the Holy is also *other* to the human. As Rudolf Otto² recognized spiritual otherness provokes fear, but in context of the experience, this becomes something more than ordinary fear, for it is commingled with awe, and fascination, the desire to participate in and identify with the reality experienced, though that reality is Not-human, and other to the human.

Ecofeminists specifically attempt to reintegrate these two aspects of otherness: to recognize this world, the here and now, the body the mind, sexuality and ecstasy as divinity diffused throughout the world. For me, the most difficult aspect of ecofeminism begins at this point, with the turn toward recognizing Divinity as the Goddess and growing, with Deena Metzger, down into the tree.

I find myself uncomfortably alienated just reading Kim Chernin's description of her own initiation experience:

"in the grip of extreme emotion ...
before an immense tree ... my
body ... doing something peculiar.
I notice it, thought I should fight
it, was doing it anyway. Then it
was done. There I was on the
ground in front of the tree. Tears
streaming down my face. I, raised
in a family of Marxist atheists,
down on my knees, worshipping?"
(Chernin, *Reinventing Eve*, p. 7)

Well, I think to myself, she should have kept that private!

Thinking about the women who meet in ritual circle I find my rejection taking slightly different form. I read in Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (Harper and Row, 1979):

"The importance of the Goddess symbol for women cannot be overstressed. The image of the Goddess inspires women to see ourselves as divine, our bodies as sacred, the changing phases of our lives as holy, our aggression as healthy our anger as purifying and our power to nurture and create, but also to limit and destroy when necessary, as the very force that sustains all life. Through the Goddess, we ... can move beyond narrow, constricting roles and

become whole." (p. 9)

But I think to myself of those pantheon goddesses I have somehow become acquainted with and recognize two sources of distrust. Either, like the earth-goddess mother of Sita, in the Ramayana, I fear the goddess will not be strong enough to protect her daughter. Or, drawing upon the Greek and Hindu mythologies more generally, I fear that as so often in the past, the Goddess will be cooptable by patriarchy. I am unavoidably aware that in India, Goddess worship comfortably coincides with hyper-degradation of women and the environment.

Of course it is not a necessary correlate that Goddess religions degrade women or the environment. Certainly in India some women find themselves empowered to use the Goddess toward the ends of ecological survival (cf. Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women; London: Zed Books, 1988). But St. Francis of Assisi found similar empowerment in the patriarchal God.

So, I wonder whether the re-evaluation of Witchcraft, and Covens and all the Old Religions is either necessary or possible. Can anyone re-create a tradition so long lost? Are we, by history and practice and life experiences to date, so far from what the former worshippers of the Old Religions experienced that all one can hope for is something quite different, however meaningful to the one experiencing it. If we are, and I certainly suspect that is the case for me, then why call an affirmation of spiritual otherness by a name belonging to a time gone, calling it what it can't be?

Faced with this internal confusion, I find myself wondering, 1. does ecology, does ecofeminism need this spiritual dimension? And 2. if spirituality is needed, why give it a human face and call it god or goddess, as if the otherness of Nature cannot be Other and still be spiritually meaningful. Judith Plant writes as if she shares some of my discomfort, but she acknowledges that she found "spiritual experiences ... in moments of awareness of my oneness with the natural world." I can accept that, why ask more? She adds, "More than this though, this feminist spirituality is a process of healing and growing into maturity." (Healing the Wounds, p. 256). I'm still not at that point. Perhaps I may never be. Am I still an ecofeminist?

Fortunately for my questioning, I find that one of the principles of ecofeminism allows me leeway.

To be an ecofeminist I need not worship the Goddess myself. But rather I must work toward

finding in myself tolerance sufficient to recognize that wisdom can be gained by multiple circumstances, and those who worship the Goddess, and seek the ecofeminist new spiritualities provide someone like me with the opportunity to realize tolerance, for they certainly provide me with multiple circumstances.

University of Rhode Island

Notes

1. M.C. Lugones and E. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'the Women's Voice.'" *Women's Studies International Forum* 6, pp. 573-81.
2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1st ed. trans. by John Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1925).



The November, 1990, issue of *Western American Literature* contains Glen Love's article "Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism" and Peter Wild's study of John C. Van Dyke. For information, write to Professor Thomas J. Lyon, Editor, *Western American Literature*, Department of English, Utah State University, Logan, UT 84322-3200.

The special nature writing issue of *The North Dakota Quarterly* (ed. Sherman Paul and Don Scheese) will appear in Spring 1991.

On the occasion of the Columbus quintecentennial, *Weber Studies* invites submissions with multicultural emphases on "Exploration and Discovery." Send submissions by March, 1992, to Professor Neila C. Seshachari, Editor, *Weber Studies*, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408-1201.

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The following bibliography lists critical works that discuss literature from an ecologically informed or environmentally conscious perspective. Such work has been classified under a wide variety of subject headings, making it difficult to locate. We thought that printing this bibliography would be a way of informing readers of the breadth and substance of the emerging field of "ecocriticism." The bibliography is still evolving, and we welcome your additions to it. Please send references to Cheryl Burgess, English Department, University of Nevada-Reno, Reno, NV 89557.

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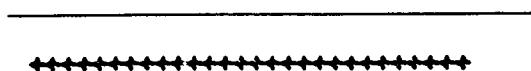


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