



## **Environmental Justice in Literature: Review, Resistance, Renaissance**

Curriculum Unit 21.02.05  
by Rose Murphy

### **Background**

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I teach 10th grade English at an interdistrict magnet school in New Haven, Connecticut. This is a required class for all students, and is intended to cover a wide breadth of topics, text genres, skills, and modes of writing before students may choose to further specialize their study of English in AP classes or dual enrollment courses during their junior year. The course is structured in theme-based quarters; each quarter targets a mode of writing (argumentative, persuasive, analytical) paired with a thematic unit of study. No texts are mandated, but texts are suggested to align with each theme. Though teachers have the flexibility to teach texts that they believe will best engage and push their students to a deeper understanding of the targeted standards, I became more and more aware of a lack of depth to the curriculum's nature writing unit.

The district-endorsed unit, titled "Self and Nature: Exploring Human Relationships with Nature" recommends texts that are familiar to many English teachers as the canon of American transcendentalism, the 19th-century literary and philosophical movement advocating for the unity of nature, the divine, and humanity. Some suggestions outside of that realm are recommended (Rachel Carson, Jack London, Jon Krakauer), but even these more modern suggestions do very little to tell a more accurate and complete story of human's place in the environment.

### **Rethinking Environmental Literature: Unit Goals**

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In my search to engage students in a more complex investigation of environmental literature, I wanted to challenge the implicit messages delivered in this unit. First, I sought to dispel the myth that environmental literature is a colorblind genre bereft of human influence, fully divested from any notions of race, power, or justice. Second, the implicit message in much of the curriculum surrounding environmental literature is that it is written by and for white people; the dominant narrative present in environmental literature tends to be of a white man finding solace and peace in conveniently pristine forests, while people of color, if mentioned at all, are cast as subhuman beings, mystically connected to the natural world. Third, I wanted to foster an understanding of environmental justice: the understanding that humans are inherently connected to their

environment. Injustices committed against marginalized groups can not be separated from the environment, and injustices committed against the environment disproportionately harm marginalized groups. Lastly, I wanted to ensure that these three curricular goals were explicitly taught to and understood by students, allowing them to reclaim the power often denied to learners in the study of the environment and enabling them to critique the dominant narratives of nature writing.

To organize and facilitate a clear understanding of a more complex and comprehensive reimagining of an environmental literature unit, I divided readings, discussions, and activities into three thematic understandings:

1. Review: How can we critique the dominant approach to nature writing and environmental literature?
2. Resistance: How do authors and artists serve as revolutionaries in the face of environmental injustice?
3. Renaissance: How do authors and artists celebrate and affirm their identities as they intersect with their environment?

## **The English Classroom: A Place for the Environment?**

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Some teachers may face resistance to devoting time in the English classroom to environmental literature and to the tenets of environmental justice: the documentation and study of the intentional and disproportionate harm done to environments occupied by marginalized communities. In reality, English teachers have a unique and essential opportunity to foster understanding and discussion surrounding these topics.

Limiting the study of the environment as a field only to be taught in science classes profoundly disserves students. Similarly to the English literature teacher only “doing” the environment through the study of American transcendentalism, the school which only teaches environmentalism in science classes deprives students of their power and a complex understanding of the role of nature in their world-- and of the role humans play in that natural world. Tim Swinehart, in *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*, describes this as “ecological illiteracy,” a crisis of understanding crafted by this lack of understanding the inextricably interconnected anthropocene and the natural world (1). In history textbooks, for example, the environment is largely ignored; the exception is when it is commodified, rivers “made to provide power...simply waiting to be harnessed by the new industrialists.” The outcome of this lack of complex or accurate depiction of nature damages not only our academic understanding, but also our morality. “When we’re not taught to understand the intimate and fundamental connections between people and the environment in our nation’s history,” writes Swinehart, “it should come as no surprise that we struggle to make these same connections today. (2)”

Limiting environmental education to the science classroom also limits students in their understanding of themselves as readers, writers, artists, and thinkers. Most science teachers do not introduce poetry, art, fiction, or film into their classes. This is not a criticism of science teachers, who are constrained by time, curricular pressures, or lack of experience in texts other than nonfiction; rather, it should serve as a call to action for secondary teachers in other subject areas to heed their responsibility to introduce environmentalism in their classes.

This approach is, unfortunately, uncommon; however, the reason for this is all too understandable. Professor of environmental justice and Chicana studies Laura Pulido, in her foreword to *Latinx Environmentalisms*, admits to her own shortcomings in broadening her perspective of environmental writing to include fiction: “I

recall, in particular, a discussion of Raymond Barrio's *The Plum Plum Pickers*. How could a piece of fiction, let alone an analysis of it, be of consequence when people were dying? (3)" Pulido later refined and reevaluated her perspective, coming to the conclusion that "questions of representation, futurity, imagination, and memory and the need to examine complexities that exceed social science tools" are reliant on all fields, including the humanities. In his interview "A Story is a Physical Space," author Héctor Tobar, whose background is in journalism, came to a similar revelation:

"I didn't feel that I was being allowed the full expression of my voice as a writer within the boundaries of daily journalism... I wanted, seriously to study fiction...I read a novel by an LA writer that began in East LA. It had a portrayal of a neighborhood that I did not recognize and that seemed incredibly stereotyped and exploitative. It made me really angry because I loved to read... But that's when I knew that's what I wanted to be. I felt I had more stories to tell; I felt I had stories to tell that didn't fit within the columns of a newspaper. (4)"

Pulido and Tobar made the conscious decision to expand their environmental writing and study to encompass fiction; however, most scientists do not give this same attention to art, fiction, and poetry. Combine this with the fact that most humanities teachers do not offer the integration of nature and the environment as a lens through which to view human stories, and you have a recipe for ecological illiteracy; in this model, literature and science pass each other as parallel lines, never converging, never offering students the opportunity clearly see the existence of their intersection.

Furthermore, limiting the study of the environment solely to nonfiction offers students a skewed view of who is entitled to the identity of an activist, an author, a scientist, or an artist. As Pulido learned, fiction has a valuable role in creating a complex understanding of the links between humanity and the environment; so, too, does it create a reclamation of rights, joy, and humanity for students who see themselves in the stories of marginalization often created by nonfiction. English teachers, then, must remember their moral responsibility to their students as they teach potentially traumatizing and dismissive concepts. Focusing on the devastation of Flint's lead poisoning without introducing the courage and resistance of those such as Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, who saved lives by refusing to remain silent, is denigrating to students. A broader view of subject areas where environmental justice studies belong expands students' understandings beyond the scientific facts and figures, bending the arc of the narrative towards the triumph, reclamation, and renaissance of the artists and authors who resist injustice and affirm their identities with joy.

In the midst of stories of destruction and hopelessness common in the field of environmental literature, this shift towards joy must remain central. Without the affirmation of joy, there is no story of resistance, no stories of reclamations or affirmations of power. Without stories of celebration, there are no stories of revolution to serve as inspiration for a new generation of essential activists, authors, and artists.

These young activists are more important than ever in creating a new generation of storytellers and critical thinkers who are able to resist and use their voices when they encounter environmental injustices. To empower young people, English teachers can narrow their focus of environmental literature or nature writing to recent and current works of literature, art, or film. This offers a counternarrative to the portrayal of nature writing as something irretrievably "from the past," which students may have encountered in previous classes discussing Whitman or Thoreau. Secondly, English teachers can refine their focus by not only limiting their texts to current works, but through ethical consideration. In this sense, "ethical" does not refer to the study of environmental ethics, which is often covered in science classes; rather, it refers to the ethics of sharing with students stories that 1) disrupt the dominant narrative of the environment as simultaneously a colorblind and

white-only space; 2) illustrate a triumph through resistance to environmental racism; and 3) serve as an illustration of the renaissance in environmental literature and art, reaffirming identity in spite of, rather than in response to, environmental injustice.

## Review: Critiquing the Dominant Narrative

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Review: How can we critique the dominant approach to nature writing and environmental literature?

Across American high schools and universities, a casual survey of course syllabi mentioning nature writing or environmental literature yields similar results. As if following a road map, many of these classes will begin with discussions of the tenets of American transcendentalism. Students read about Henry David Thoreau's brave experiment in the wilderness of Concord, Massachusetts and Emerson's simultaneous celebration of the Oversoul and the self over all. Some courses will cover Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*, while others might venture into an attempt at selling students a modern reimagining of transcendentalism in Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. However, these seemingly ubiquitous ecological narratives fall short in addressing the realities of intersectional-- and therefore accurate-- environmentalism and environmentalist literature.

Firstly, most American environmental literature courses or units entirely omit the voices of the Indigenous stewards of the land. If Indigenous voices are at all mentioned, they tend to be depicted (rather than heard) through the damaging stereotype of the magical Indigenous environmentalist, in which Indigenous people are portrayed with some primal and mystical connection to the Earth-- or to animals. This portrayal of Indigenous people as inherently connected to the natural world has its origins in white settler colonialism; for colonizers, portraying Native people as savages or near-animals was a convenient way to justify brutality, thievery, and violence. In a letter to James Duane, George Washington advocated for "good relationships" with Native people in order to seize land:

"Attempting to drive [Indigenous people] by force of arms out of their Country... as we have already experienced is like driving the Wild Beasts of the Forest which will return us soon as the pursuit is at an end and fall perhaps on those that are left there; when the gradual extension of our Settlements will as certainly cause the Savage as the Wolf to retire; both being beasts of prey tho' they differ in shape. (5)"

The stereotype of Indigenous people as mystical and quasi-human environmentalists persists. One well-known example is the "Crying Indian" public service announcement, in which "Iron Eyes Cody" (actually Italian actor Espera de Corti) stares despairingly at the camera as trash is hurled onto his moccasins (6). This PSA unfortunately encapsulates the extent of Indigenous representation in environmental literature courses: inauthentic passes at Indigenous representation mired in tired stereotypes. Worse still, the environmentalism sold to the American public in the PSA was a campaign sponsored by the beverage industry, staunchly opposed to corporate environmental regulations. The PSA presents "Iron Eyes" as some sort of ancient vestige of another time, a mystic and almost inhuman figure. Environmental literature courses fail to depict Indigenous people in their full and current efforts to realize environmental justice against centuries of governmentally-manufactured oppression.

Environmental literature courses also tend towards deifying the Holy Trinity of nineteenth-century

conservationists, transcendentalists, and nature poets. Presenting these canonical figures in environmentalist literature as infallible is not only ignorant, but inexcusable; many of these so-called great figures who advocated for seemingly innocuous causes like “self reflection,” “equality among men,” and “appreciation of nature” in fact held deeply-seated racist beliefs reflected, upon closer inspection, in many of their works. From John Muir (“The first specimens [of Indigenous people] I had seen, were mostly ugly, and some of them altogether hideous...Somehow they seemed to have no right place in the landscape” (7)) to Walt Whitman (“Who believes that White and Black can ever amalgamate in America ? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites ? And is it not better so ?” (8)), a course or curricula which fails to fully capture the racism of its foundational authors teaches a single inaccurate and white-washed narrative.

This narrative of white supremacy in environmental writing is fundamental to the history of white American environmental conservation. Though the origin of many aspects of the environmental movement is deeply-rooted in a dark history of eugenics, this idea is not often taught-- or perhaps is not widely-known enough to be taught-- in environmental literature classes. For people such as Madison Grant, Gifford Pinchot, Charles Goethe, Henry Fairfield Osborne, and Theodore Roosevelt, their interest in environmental conservation was inextricably linked to their desire to conserve white supremacy (9). Still, perhaps because environmentalism is, on its surface, an inoffensive and progressive field of study, it is taught in most schools without examination of its disturbing history.

Without a critical understanding of the history of American environmental conservation, it is difficult for students in environmental literature courses to fully grasp the link between the environment and oppression-- both current and historical. This is a disservice to students, as well as to the generations of people working to transform dominant systems to assert new frameworks for engaging and understanding the environment.

Without a more comprehensive understanding, students will not understand the rich history of Black farmers in the US, of Indigenous activists demonstrating the link between human rights and the environment, or of a new generation of public health activists and citizen scientists working for ethical laws and policies in human-centered environments.

A new approach to teaching environmental literature, then, must seek to reverse the damage that centuries of colonized and commodified nature writing and white supremacist conservation have done to the collective understanding of what environmental writing entails. This begins with creating a new understanding of the environment; traditionally, somehow only spaces designated as certifiably remote or wild have been considered worthy of an “ environmental” status. In reality, a new understanding of environmental literature must seek to develop an understanding of the environment as a morally neutral and universal setting, inextricably linked to one’s identity. The exploration of the environment as morally neutral is central to the decolonization of nature writing and literature; in the dominant narrative, nature is somehow both healing and savage, both to be explored and to be dominated. The difference lies in narration; when Muir centers himself in nature, it is a salve for the soul, bringing Muir to an otherworldly transcendence reminiscent of Emerson’s transparent eyeball. When Muir centers the “ugly...altogether hideous” indigenous people in their own land, the land is then something to be conquered, dominated, to be conserved in its wild state for the benefit of settlers who will know how to properly appreciate its untamed beauty. To deconstruct this dominant narrative, a deeper understanding of the environment as morally neutral must take place; neither good nor evil, but read, as a text, with the same stereotypes, prejudices, and aspersions cast by generations of settler colonizers and their legacies.

In a new course centered around environmental literature, the environment must not be taught as a topic wholly separate from human involvement. Humanity is part of the environment, and the presence of humans does not negate a space's designation as "nature" or "natural." All spaces are impacted and crafted by the anthropocene, whether they are designated as a government-preserved wilderness or as a government-preserved redlined neighborhood. Students, in seeking to understand this concept of the environment, should engage in criticism of how environments are created, but must not be misled by generations of literature and practices which preach that some environments are inherently more valuable or more worthy of transcendentalist-era worship.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Curriculum Audit Through Critical Questions**

In this multi-day project, students will work to examine the existing curriculum's suggested texts for the study of environmental literature. Students will work in groups to examine the narratives conveyed by the existing literature suggestions: which stories are told or suppressed, which narratives are incomplete, which environmental interests are prioritized, and how the environment is viewed, used, or extracted in relation to human interests.

To open this project, the teacher will guide students through one typical representation of environmental literature: an excerpt from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, in which Thoreau preaches "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity" as he takes an imaginatively idealized vow of poverty. As students read the excerpt, the teacher will lead them through critical questions:

1. Which story is privileged?
2. Whose story is told?
3. Who created this story?
4. Which stories are suppressed, missing, or ignored?
5. Which narratives are incomplete?
6. What implicit or unspoken messages are being communicated?

Students will annotate their thoughts surrounding these critical questions as they arise from a whole-class discussion, resulting in a group-created exemplar of a critical analysis of the place of *Walden* in the curriculum.

Once students are comfortable with examining the excerpt through the lens of critical questions, they are ready to move on to a group-centered project: auditing the existing district curriculum. In this multi-day project, students will assess the scope, accuracy, inclusivity, and complexity of the district's existing environmental literature texts. The teacher will distribute excerpts from the district curriculum's suggested texts; if the district does not have an environmental writing unit, many sample syllabi are available online. A typical sampling of suggested environmental literature often includes:

- *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau
- *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson
- *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman
- *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin
- *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson
- *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London

- *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer
- Selected poems by Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, William Wordsworth, John Keats

In their groups, students will work to annotate and critique 2-3 text excerpts, using the critical questions modeled as a whole group to assess their provided texts. If desired, teachers may also provide a scorecard adapted from or similar to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center's tool, "Assessing Bias in Standards and Curricular Models. (10)"

Once students have thoroughly critiqued and annotated their findings within their groups, they will share their annotations and conclusions with the rest of their class. Students listening should take notes as their classmates present, and, before class ends, should complete an individual journal or quickwrite in which they capture their feelings surrounding their classmates' findings and their impressions of the provided curriculum.

In the following days, students will work as a class to draft and send a letter to their district curriculum office voicing their opinions surrounding the existing curriculum. The letter should be a collaborative and student-centered effort, with students taking charge of the drafting, revising, and editing process. The final copy should be sent, along with the original group annotations, to the district curriculum office, and should request a response or address to the questions and criticisms raised.

## Resistance: Authors as Visionaries

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Resistance: How do authors and artists serve as anti-racist visionaries in the quest for environmental justice?

Most students are passingly familiar with the idea of environmental justice, even if they don't know the term; they are generally able to cite the seemingly inexorable progress of climate change as something that, for example, will disproportionately unjustly impact young people. In pushing students towards understanding a more nuanced perspective of environmental justice, Dr. Dorceta Taylor's definition of the field is accessible and eye-opening: "In the United States and around the world, low-income, Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian people tend to be living in spaces where environmental hazards, extreme natural and human-made disasters, and environmental degradation occur more rampantly... that is by design. (11)" Those key words-- Taylor's simple and devastating affirmation that yes, inequality and segregation are by design-- are essential for students to understand before delving into current works of environmental literature and current issues in environmental justice.

A thorough grasp of Taylor's definition of environmental justice, then, must include the concept that authors and artists who recognize and speak out in pursuit of environmental justice are, inherently, activists. If, as Taylor states, the environment is unable to be separated from issues of humanity, racism, and privilege, then environmentalists, by definition, are human rights activists. There is no such thing as a race-neutral examination of environmentalism, and human rights are inseparable from any work of environmental literature. A more complex examination of environmental literature must include the affirmation of artists and authors as visionaries and activists in the fight for environmental justice.

### Classroom Activities

### **Power to Critique: Analysis Through Retort (Rationale)**

One method that can help students venture outside of their reading “habits” or comfort zones is to ask them how different figures, authors, or characters might imagine a scenario or react to a piece of text. This move helps students enter the idea of literary lenses and, for teachers who need to help students deconstruct years of taking literature at face value without critique, is a valuable tool. In examining recent environmental catastrophes, most students are familiar with the impact of Hurricane Katrina. In light of Taylor’s emphasis on environmental devastation by design, however, Katrina can serve as a model to help students “talk back” to literature. For example, George W. Bush’s September 16, 2005 speech from New Orleans, in which he reacts to the “blind and random” devastation of the storm, is often used in high schools as a text for students to analyze. Rhetorical analysis is a vital component of high school English, but Bush’s speech is in no way empowering or triumphant. However, when viewed through the lens of Taylor’s definition of destruction by design, students can still have an empowering experience reading the text; by learning to refute and discredit Bush’s language, students gain power in the relationship between reader and text.

This balance of power-- across content areas-- can be nurtured by the teacher asking students to take on different roles. Christensen uses this practice in *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, where she describes teaching students to identify behavior roles in situations of justice and injustice: target, ally, perpetrator, and bystander. Christensen teaches students to identify these terms before facilitating role play and writing exercises in which students take on these roles and responsibilities. As Christensen describes, this practice is integral to helping students gain power: “As my students shared incidents of injustice in their lives,” writes Christensen, “I realized that they didn’t know how to act differently. They felt stuck, backed into a corner, frozen. (12)”

In the context of environmental justice, many people, young and old, feel frozen, unable to verbalize or give voice to their feelings surrounding complex and often criminal violations of human rights in the environmental sphere. Bush’s speech in response to Katrina is one example of a text that, if left unchecked, would serve no purpose beyond a rhetorical analysis; it would not serve an ethical practice in fulfilling Christensen’s goals of helping students gain power in their roles. However, in pushing students to assume a role during reading, such as the role of Dr. Dorceta Taylor, teachers are helping students achieve the curricular skills necessary for a rhetorical analysis while more importantly teaching them how to critique and speak up against injustices-- even if the injustice is committed by a person in power.

Giving students the opportunity, even through a relatively brief exercise, to offer a retort and rebuttal to injustice is fundamental to their skills as writers and thinkers who are able to voice their opinions in the face of injustice. Doing this in the classroom is a vital beginning; while most texts should be affirming, celebratory, and joyful, to ignore the realities of injustices committed by people in power is to neglect to prepare students to speak up and become upstanders in the face of, as Taylor writes, harm that is done by design. Christensen agrees: “Students need tools to confront injustice; they need to hear our approval that intervention is not only appropriate and acceptable, but heroic. Acting in solidarity with others is a learned skill—one I hope more of us will teach. (13)” Bush’s speech serves as a method for students to begin critiquing the work of others, and to learn to become more critical consumers of media-- both important skills.

### **Power to Critique: Analysis Through Retort (Lesson)**

In this lesson, teachers will discuss the topic of environmental justice through Hurricane Katrina using Christensen’s roles as literary lenses. First, teachers should introduce the roles of target, ally, perpetrator, and bystander. As a warm-up, students will engage in reflective journaling: when have they engaged in these



roles? How have they observed allies standing up for others in history, in the media, or in their own lives?

Next, students will practice writing a retort to reclaim power through a whole-group exercise. As a whole class, students will read the remarks of then-House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, who stated that "It looks like a lot of that place [New Orleans] could be bulldozed," and that rebuilding the city "doesn't make sense." Using a document camera or projector to capture student reactions to Hastert's words, the teacher can guide students through drafting a whole-class response to Hastert's language. During this process, students should identify the roles of perpetrator, target, and ally.

Once students are comfortable with their role in responding to the words of perpetrators, they are ready to analyze Bush's 2005 speech independently. Students will read Bush's speech and annotate for initial reactions before moving on to a double-entry journal. In using this text analysis strategy, students will assume the role of Dorceta Taylor as an ally with a strong understanding of environmental justice. Students will write their retort to Bush in the voice of Dr. Taylor. Writing as Dr. Taylor, students should address 1) Bush's diction in his portrayal of New Orleans and its residents, and 2) Bush's choice of narrative: which stories is he choosing to tell in the story of Katrina, and whose stories are being neglected? By assuming the voice of an expert (Taylor), students will be pushed to examine Bush's speech through the lens of environmental justice.

### **Activism Through Lyrics (Rationale)**

For English teachers to engage in the ethical teaching of environmental literature, they should ask themselves to find resistance or celebration in the majority of the texts and materials they bring into the classroom. To do this with fidelity, teachers must examine a variety of genres and modes of text, including art and music. Examining the contributions of artists, and allowing students to examine artists in an academic context, shows students the value of artists as activists and authors in the face of injustices.

With the goal of studying the response to Hurricane Katrina through the lens of environmental justice, students will examine through close reading the work of artists who addressed the Bush administration's response to Katrina. All song choices masterfully use allusion and a forceful tone to call attention to the failure of multiple institutions in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as well as the failure of institutions across generations which engineered Katrina as the predictable outcome of environmental injustice.

### **Activism Through Lyrics (Lesson)**

In pairs, students will receive printed lyrics and links to listen to four songs: Mos Def's *Dollar Day*, Public Enemy's *Hell No We Ain't Alright*, The Legendary K.O.'s *George Bush Don't Like Black People*, and Jay-Z's *Minority Report*. Students will choose one of the songs to analyze, focusing on the artist's rhetorical choices in how they chose to respond to injustice.

In their pairs, the students will listen to and perform a close reading of their chosen song. Their close readings will be used later as the framework for their analysis, so teachers should ensure that students understand how to engage in the close reading process. Students should pay special attention to 1) how their artist creates their chosen tone through diction, imagery, and detail, and 2) how their chosen artist chooses to critique multiple systems or institutions in their condemnation of the response to Katrina.

After engaging with the lyrics through close reading, paired students will work together to write a music review analyzing their chosen artist's piece. In their review, students should use their close reading to discuss how their author created their chosen tone through their lyrical decisions, their artist's success or failure in

critiquing systematic injustice, and an analysis of the success of the messages that their artist chose to communicate to their audience.

The creation of this polished piece of writing can conclude with a share-out in which students have the opportunity to listen to all pieces of music as they read their classmates' music reviews.

### **Using Our Power: Public Resistance (Rationale)**

Another current example of literature as current resistance to environmental crimes comes from Flint's lead crisis. Janet Phoenix, in Robert Bullard's 1993 *Confronting Environmental Racism*, writes that "lead poisoning, while completely preventable, is one of the most common environmental health diseases in the United States. (14)" Nearly thirty years after its publication, the facts of Phoenix's call to action against lead poisoning still hold true: lead poisoning directly harms children, largely children of color, with irreversible and devastating consequences. There is no policy, writes Phoenix, developed to "break through the de facto segregation that keeps people of color trapped in contaminated houses, jobs, and communities. (15)" Flint's criminal lead poisoning, in which Governor Rick Snyder and his administration deliberately covered up and excused the poisoning of Flint's largely Black population, is an example many students have heard of; however, many students are unaware that a fearless woman was instrumental in dismantling the system of abuse and crime that poisoned the city.

Teaching about pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha is teaching a story of disruption, resistance, and revolution against abusers. In Christensen's book, Dr. Hanna-Attisha would be a lesson in action. Teachers can use her town hall meeting, in which she speaks to the Flint community about defying the threats she received to stay silent for the good of Flint's children, as a model for effective public speaking; Hanna-Attisha's blend of powerful logos and ethos with stirring pathos is an authentic example of persuasive technique. Teachers can also use excerpts from her book, *What the Eyes Don't See*, in which Hanna-Attisha writes about her tireless fight to, as she puts it, join the activists and journalists of Flint as a piece of their puzzle. "I was just the last piece," writes Hanna-Attisha. "The state wouldn't stop lying until somebody came along to prove that real harm was being done to kids. Then the house of cards fell. (16)"

English teachers can also use Hanna-Attisha's celebration of her identity throughout her books and op-eds as a mentor text for students to affirm their own identities. Hanna-Attisha begins *What the Eyes Don't See* with a discussion of her name and her journey to Michigan as an Iraqi immigrant. Throughout her work, she affirms her identity: as a woman, an immigrant, and a scientist. In a New York Times op-ed condemning Mr. Trump's travel ban, Hanna-Attisha writes:

"I grew up confident and competent and keenly aware as an immigrant from a broken country that there is injustice in the world and understanding the need to always fight for justice. Indeed, this is what has guided and framed my work in Flint, where the children I treat woke to a nightmare of usurped democracy, environmental injustice and criminal government neglect... And while I'm glad I was there to help bring the Flint water crisis to light, I can't help wondering if, with new limits on immigration, we are losing the next pediatrician who will expose a future public health disaster. (17)"

As an opener in exposing students to Dr. Hanna-Attisha's activism and resistance, teachers can introduce the concept of using one's position to enact change and speak up; Hanna-Attisha, throughout her book and in her public speaking, attests to how she felt a sense of duty as a pediatrician and community member to expose the Flint crisis despite powerful players who worked to perpetrate the attack on the public. Teachers can use

footage from Hanna-Attisha’s town hall meeting to accomplish multiple goals; students can chart how the producers of the footage and Hanna-Attisha are using ethos, pathos, and logos to present a sophisticated blend of persuasive writing to the public, and can also journal about how Hanna-Attisha fulfilled her duty as a public health professional and as a community activist. Teachers can also use selections from Hanna-Attisha’s *What the Eyes Don’t See*, many chapters of which can stand alone as powerful lessons in narrative structure.

It may seem odd to use literature surrounding the Flint crisis as classroom resources when the stated goal of using environmental literature is, in large part, to empower rather than to dispossess. However, Hanna-Attisha’s writing affirms that the topic can still be broached through a lens of courage and defiance. To ignore the topic is to ignore the model which allows Flints to continue to be committed across the country; to give attention to the people who fight against the crisis is to teach resistance.

### **Using Our Power: Public Resistance (Lesson)**

As a whole class, students will view “The Tragic Impact of Lead Poisoning on Kids: The Flint Water Crisis,” a short YouTube video that covers the origins of the Flint water crisis and introduces Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha’s role as a whistleblower who exposed the crisis and its impact on the health of Flint children (18).

In small groups, students will receive copies of Hanna-Attisha’s epilogue, titled “Haji and the Birds. (19)” In the epilogue, Hanna-Attisha recounts a family fable told by her mother. The fable describes Haji, Hanna-Attisha’s grandfather, who doted on the birds in his garden during his youth in Baghdad. When Haji’s leg is broken, the birds come together to fly him to safety. As an adult, telling the fable to her own children, Hanna-Attisha comes to understand Haji’s birds differently, aligning the narrative of her own activism with Haji’s allegory of collective action to achieve a common good.

After reading “Haji and the Birds,” students should discuss the function of the fable as it aligns with Hanna-Attisha’s own work as a revolutionary in pursuit of environmental justice. They should track their thinking throughout their discussion in a T-chart comparing Hanna-Attisha’s story to Haji’s fable.

Lastly, students should examine how Haji’s birds function as a symbol for community or group action. In their small groups, students should brainstorm a list of problems their community currently faces. Finally, they should discuss and develop a new symbol of community or group action that could serve their own community as a representation of hope. Students can present their symbols through creative writing, art, digital art, photography, and should justify their choice with a written explanation of how their symbol functions as an appropriate address to the problems faced by their community. Students should examine and discuss their classmates’ choices of symbols through a gallery walk at the conclusion of the activity.

### **Reclaiming Power: Persuasive Writing (Rationale)**

In the quest to provide students opportunities for authentic writing assignments, teachers must center student power. What is the function of the desire to provide “real world” writing tasks if students are not armed with the power and institutional knowledge to pursue results-driven writing-- that is, writing by which the author can navigate systems of power-- in the ‘real world?’

In studying environmental literature, students examine writers and artists as activists, revolutionaries, and visionaries. Through practical and empowering persuasive writing-- a tired curricular tenet of high school English-- students can go beyond proving mastery of the content and move towards using their own experiences to provoke and demand change from those with institutional power.

## **Reclaiming Power: Persuasive Writing (Lesson)**

This persuasive writing task should serve as a culminating project after reviewing the fundamentals of persuasive writing and the rhetorical triangle. To begin their persuasive writing task, students must first choose an issue of environmental justice of concern in their community. Students should be reminded of the broad definition of environmental justice and Taylor's emphasis of its connection to humanity; issues such as housing justice, school funding and segregation, gentrification, infrastructure, and workers' rights are all issues of environmental justice.

Next, students should begin to record their knowledge about their chosen issue. Eventually, they will need to write persuasively about what must be done to change their chosen topic, so students should be reminded that they will need research (logos) from reputable sources; however, equal importance should be given to firsthand experiences that students or their families may have had. Teachers should explicitly teach the value of these primary experiences of students, families, or community members as ethos-- expert knowledge, essential to a persuasive stance, that strengthens credibility.

Once students have built their background knowledge of their topic, their teacher will guide them through a skill they will need for life: researching and targeting their public officials. Depending on the issues students choose and the solutions they propose, these officials may be as local as the school principal or board of education representatives or as broad as the president or other national representative. Students must determine which official would be the most effective to target through persuasive rhetoric, and should be shown how to use the internet to find the contact information for local, state, and national representatives.

Once a student has chosen which representative they will be contacting, they should use Christensen's framework of perpetrator/bystander/target/ally to ensure they are confident in their understanding of their role in speaking out and using their voice to directly address their representative. As Christensen writes, students can gain power when they learn and put into practice the principle that intervention is heroic. Part of gaining that power comes when students research their chosen official to target their writing and persuasive appeals based on their lives, experiences, voting records, or history. Students should be encouraged to create pathos through their knowledge of their targeted audience.

After researching, students can choose whether they want to engage in persuasive writing through a letter or through a phone script, which they can read to their representative or record on a message. Students should be encouraged to speak frankly, and to persuade using a blend of logos, ethos (emphasizing personal experiences and expertise), and pathos. Students will revise and edit their persuasive piece until it is ready to be emailed, voiced, or recorded.

For most students, this writing project would be the first time that they might reach out to make direct contact with an official in power; however, by structuring this project in an encouraging and validating classroom environment, this project will hopefully nurture confidence in lived knowledge and expertise, as well as foster a confidence and skill that can establish a lifelong pattern of speaking out against issues of injustice.

## Renaissance: Celebrating Identity

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How do authors and artists celebrate and affirm their identities as they intersect with their environment?

While students need mentor texts that illustrate resistance in the face of injustice, they also need texts that celebrate; even in the field of environmental literature, which often by its nature is written in response to degradation or injustice, students must see examples of renaissance, celebration, and rebirth in writing. Christensen, in *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, affirms this need for celebration of culture and life through reading and writing. “Part of my job as a teacher is to awaken students to the joy and love that they may take for granted,” writes Christensen. “I use poetry and narrative prompts that help them ‘see’ daily gifts, to celebrate their homes and heritages. (20)” In teaching environmental literature, it can be easy to fall victim to the notion that environmental works must inherently tell stories of injustice; perhaps due to the aforementioned limiting of environmental learning to the sciences, students are often unprepared to discuss the concept of “the environment” in any way beyond discussing the crisis of climate change. However, as Christensen writes, there exists joy and love in all cultures, and therefore in all environments.

### **Celebrating Our Environments: Where is “Here?” (Rationale)**

Teachers must use poetry and narrative literature to help students examine the joy in their own environments as well as in unfamiliar environments. Poet Jamaal May speaks to this joy, too often overlooked, in his poem dedicated to Detroit titled “There are Birds Here.” In the poem, May celebrates the beauty of the birds he sees while recognizing the outsiders to his city who are determined to see the birds as some sort of melodramatic metaphor for ruination and poverty. Clint Smith, in his response poem “There Is a Lake Here,” dedicated to his hometown of New Orleans, celebrates the “lake with outstretched arms. And no, not the type of arms raised in surrender... And no, this water is not that which comes from a storm or that which turns a city into a tessellation of broken windows and spray paint. (21)” Both May and Smith, in their narrative poetry, celebrate the unconditional beauty of their environments, using powerful imagery to celebrate the natural environment that is often overlooked not because of any flaw, but because of outside ignorance and stereotyping.

### **Celebrating Our Environments: Where is “Here?” (Lesson)**

After reading and discussing the poems of both May and Smith, students will engage in creative writing that celebrates their own environments.

As an opener, students will rotate in small groups to brainstorm on chart paper in a “silent graffiti” warm-up. At each station, and without discussion, they will jot down responses to one of the following prompts:

- What do people overlook or not see clearly in New Haven?
- What misconceptions do people have about New Haven?
- What are the most joyful things about living in New Haven?
- What are the most beautiful things you see in New Haven?
- What do you love about New Haven?

When all student groups have addressed all five prompts, they will be given some silent time to journal about any responses-- whether their own or those of their classmates-- that especially resonated with them. At some point in their journal, they should identify one image, object, or idea that they wish to assert is present in their

city, similar to the assertion that May makes: “There are birds here.”

Next, students will begin their poetry workshop, in which they will write about their city (or another place they identify as home) in the style of May and Smith. Their poem can take on whatever tone, voice, or assertion that the student feels is most appropriate for their vision of their city, but it should focus on some aspect of their city that is not typically recognized, celebrated, or appreciated.

Students will be given time to engage in a full writer’s workshop to polish their writing and get feedback from their peers and teachers. When all members of the class are finished with their pieces, the poetry should be collected and anthologized (similarly to how the poetry of May and Smith are often anthologized together) in a literary magazine or collection to be distributed amongst students and across the community.

## Notes

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1. Tim Swinehart, “Stealing and Selling Nature,” in *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*, 21
2. Tim Swinehart, “Stealing and Selling Nature,” in *A People’s Curriculum for the Earth*, 20
3. Laura Pulido, “Foreward,” in *Latinx Environmentalisms*, ix
4. Shane Hall, “A Story is a Physical Space: An Interview with Hector Tobar,” in *Latinx Environmentalisms*, 77.
5. George Washington, “A Letter from George Washington to James Duane,” 1783.
6. NPR Throughline, “The Litter Myth.”
7. John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, 45.
8. Walt Whitman, *I Sit and Look Out*, 90.
9. Garland Allen, “Culling the Herd: Eugenics and the Conservation Movement in the United States, 1900-1940.”
10. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, “Assessing Bias in Standards and Curricular Models.”
11. Dorceta Taylor, in “Yale Experts Explain Environmental Justice.”
12. Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 89.
13. Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 90.
14. Janet Phoenix, “Getting the Lead Out of the Community” in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, 77.
15. Janet Phoenix, “Getting the Lead Out of the Community” in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, 79.
16. Mona Hanna-Attisha, *What the Eyes Don’t See*, 318.
17. Mona Hanna-Attisha, “Will We Lose the Doctor Who Would Stop the Next Flint?”
18. MSNBC, “Tragic Impact Of Lead Poisoning On Kids: Flint Water Crisis.”
19. Mona Hanna-Attisha, *What the Eyes Don’t See*, 326.
20. Linda Christensen, *Teaching for Joy and Justice*, 17.
21. Clint Smith, “There Is a Lake Here,” in *Counting Descent*, 170.

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## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10

Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time



frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

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