



## **The Urban, the Wilderness, and Me: An ELA Journey into Nature and Environmental Justice**

Curriculum Unit 22.01.01

by Amy Brazauski

### **Introduction**

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In Sandra Cisneros's beloved novella, main character Esperanza recounts her coming of age experiences in the low-income Latino neighborhood of Chicago. Esperanza feels out of place in her concrete, urban neighborhood and dreams of living with her family in a house set among rolling hills in the countryside. Despite her state of loneliness, the young Mexican-American girl finds a connection with an unlikely friend—four skinny trees. Esperanza shares, “They are the only ones who understand me. I am the only one who understands them. Four skinny trees with skinny necks and pointy elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. Four raggedy excuses planted by the city” (Cisneros 1984, 79). Though slightly younger in age than my students, I think of Esperanza in the faces of the young folks I teach.

Having grown up in neighborhoods and surrounding areas of New Haven, each of my students has a unique relationship to nature. Like Esperanza, some of these young people’s experiences with nature are limited and can be depicted as a houseplant in an aging high-rise, a patch of browning grass by the stop sign, or another slivered piece of something natural in a concrete jungle. Many may expect that these students do not care, recognize, or consider their relationship with nature in their environment. In fact, many people may fail to recognize nature when in context with the urban environment. Literature, movies, and the outdoor industry have romanticized nature to mean a place that exists only in remote, exclusive, or pristine places. In this dichotomy of thought, it is easy to think that nature is a place that belongs to those who can access it, and thus estranged from the minds and experiences from those who cannot. In this way, we devalue the relationship and interests urban children may have and have the potential to develop with nature.

The Urban, The Wilderness, and Me is an original curriculum unit that explores the interconnectedness of city ecosystems, the natural world, and the ways our individual human lives are uniquely entwined with these spaces. In the unit, students explore the ways in which the wilderness manages to survive and thrive within the cityscape. In environments where nature seems to have been suffocated and swept away, students look at how plants, insects, and animals have reclaimed their place. Students also look at the reclamation of the relationship between the global majority and the outdoors in the face of western ideologies and romanticisms of nature, the discovered, and the explored. Though authors, scientists, and the commercial outdoor industry may have whitewashed the depiction of whom the wilderness is for, students learn of the cultural relationships

indigenous people and people of the African diaspora have developed with nature and the ways black and brown leaders of today are vocalizing their ancestral relationship with the land.

## Rationale

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When considering the assumption of “for whom nature is for”, it is important to note trends in accessibility and use of natural lands. According to the US Forest Service, “Blacks or African Americans, who make up about 13 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for about 1 percent of national forest visits in 2010. Hispanics or Latinos, who make up about 17 percent of the U.S. population, accounted for less than 7 percent” (Flores, Valenzuela, Roberts, Falco). It is also important to consider the proximity in which people live to what is deemed as natural or protected lands. According to Pew Research, “Among urban residents, 44% are white, compared with 68% in suburban and small metro counties and 79% in rural counties. In fact, whites have become the minority in most urban counties (53% of them are majority nonwhite) since 2000; only about one-in-ten suburban (10%) and rural (11%) counties are majority nonwhite” (Pew Research 2020). These statistics indicate that white folks have the greatest geographic proximity and access to traditional natural environments. The city of New Haven demographics reflect the nationwide trends with “30.8% Hispanic or Latino, 33.6% Black or African American, 43.6% white” (US Census Bureau 2021).

High School in the Community (HSC) is a small, magnet high school located in New Haven, Connecticut. Of 237 students enrolled at HSC, 87% are students of color and 75% of students come from low-income families. When correlating demographics, assumptions about the lack of experience students have with nature at HSC are understandable. The inequities in representation of low-income folks and people of color in the outdoors stands as a point of recognition and challenge in the face of the school’s mission. With High School in the Community’s magnet theme of leadership, social justice, public policy, and service, HSC takes pride in being a “small school for students who want to do big things” including recognizing, interrogating, and reimagining what nature means and looks like for each student and their community as a whole. Through project-based curriculum and mastery-based grading policies, HSC strives to empower students to step up and make a positive impact on society while pursuing their individual educational goals.

In English II specifically, sophomore students study a yearlong enduring theme of social justice. The Social Justice Symposium asks students to select and then research a social justice issue that concerns them, synthesizing their work into a proposal for making a positive change. At the culminating event, sophomore students invite community members to discuss the real life actions that, based on their research, students recommend to address the problem. At its core, the Social Justice Symposium means to encourage students to inquire into and challenge the conditions that create social injustice in the local and national community and share solutions with school and community leaders.

The implementation of The Urban, The Wilderness, and Me unit works to engage students in the social justice symposium process—reflecting, identifying, researching, and acting—and spans the first three months of the academic year. The unit contains four main concepts: 1) personal reflection on nature, 2) nature and the urban environment, 3) access to wilderness, 4) environmental injustice. Students first engage in the practice of natural observation. Students reflect on their past observations of nature and are asked to keep records of their relationship with the urban landscape and their experience with nature through personal reflections, daily observations, and notes as they develop their learning of relationships of authors, poets, scientists,

outdoor enthusiasts, activists and the land. In class and through outdoor experiences, students have space to integrate their own and their cultural relationships, connections, histories, and memories with nature in both urban and wilderness settings.

The unit not only aligns with the major goals of High School in the Community's Social Justice magnet theme but also with the initiatives of the WILD (Wilderness Inspired Leadership Development) program. Students involved in the WILD program have the opportunity to engage in outdoor experiences ranging from day hikes at local state parks to overnight backpacking trips on Connecticut and New Hampshire portions of the Appalachian Trail. The purpose of the trips is to help students foster independent and group leadership skills as they navigate wilderness. Entwining the unit with the WILD program gives students the opportunity to experience learning in a traditional nature environment as well as develop observational and narrative writing skills.

Through reading, writing, and hands-on experience students construct their own understandings of the relationship between self and nature within their classroom, their neighborhoods, and the outdoors. Students engage in first hand observational learning by: growing, tending, and connecting with a plant in their class and later at home; creating photojournalism stories about the natural elements they encounter in their daily lives and beyond; visiting urban wildernesses in the school community such as the Long Wharf neighborhood, and participating in wilderness day and weekend trips. To further their understanding of historical relationships with nature, students read, watch, and research practices of indigenous peoples in the Standing Rock community and Nova Scotia Water Protectors organization. The unit culminates in an environmental action project which students design based on a school need they identify and implement by engaging with students and faculty in the school community.

### **Becoming Metacognitive: How can nature teach us to think?**

In his dedication of *What The Robin Knows*, Jon Young acknowledges the importance of present and past indigenous and nonindigenous people, “who sit, watch, and wonder—and ultimately share their stories and questions with others for further learning, reflection, and just plain excitement. These sources continue to build our collective understanding of bird and animal language [the natural world]” (Young, Gardoqui v). Young frames his viewpoint through the long and ever evolving lineage of observational learning. He acknowledges the ancestral and modern indigenous and present day observers’ oral and written knowledge has led to deeper understanding of patterns and approaches commonly found amongst animals and beyond. Young elaborates on his framework, highlighting the unique indigenous observational skills of scouting and tracking that he argues are fundamental to scientific method. He asserts, “[trackers and scouts of native traditions from around the world] use traditional techniques and knowledge to make their living. They cannot afford to be too far off base in their thinking and conjectures...These people are very grounded in the real world” (Young, Gardoqui xxii).

So what can we learn from traditional practices? Young shares, “... the more keenly our antennae are tuned to the sounds, sights, and other sensory input from our world, and the more of our brains we engage, the more we get in touch with our ancient instincts and the instinctive abilities that all animals automatically manifest” (Young, Gardoqui xxiv). And, while you might wonder how are observational skills related to reading comprehension, writing, and abstract thinking skills connected, the truth is they are much aligned. Young goes on to note the practice of the Kalahari people: “Through [their] form of storytelling—which is what imitation really is—a great deal of understanding, awareness, and connection emerges. These elements are essential to understanding bird language [forms of communication]. As awareness grows, appreciation grows, too. As

appreciation grows, so does empathy” (Young, Gardoqui xxvi). Narratives, such as story-telling performances, are a form of recording, sharing, and passing down information that is essential to understanding concepts from survival to human connection.

In the humanities classroom, educators ask students to share their understanding of narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, through writing and oral communication. Student goals include: citing strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text; determining a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; and analyzing how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (ELA CCSS). These skills are not only necessary for students to performing well in an academic setting, but are also needed to communicate effectively in social and professional environments. However, over the past few years, I have witnessed a decline in students' performance in producing such highly detailed and developed writing. I believe this stunting may be in part due to a shift in communication stemming from the digital world we live in. In response to writing prompts, students are more apt to provide short answers, in style similar to a text message, or struggle to produce details to support their ideas or clearly explain their thought process. Perhaps the high popularity of short form media, such as TikTok, has affected students' ability to remain focused, recall detailed information, or make meaningful observations. Although communication and media have become bite-sized, students need the capacity to initiate, grow, and maintain complex thought processes as they navigate solving real life problems, evolving into each stage of life, and creating healthy relationships with themselves and community. By returning to nature, we can strive to observe, learn, and grow from the natural patterns and ways of life.

### **The Sit Spot**

Imagine walking out into your little spot of wilderness, whether it be a nearby urban park, a patch of woods in your backyard, or a clearing in a favorite walking trail. You journey towards this location with the purpose of sitting independently and quietly. Clearing your head of daily tasks or upcoming events, you settle yourself and focus on your senses. In this position it may be easy to let your mind wander or to grow impatient with the seeming nothingness around you, but you take a moment to move through the uneasiness while your eyes scan the scene before you, your ears adjust to the swirling sounds, you feel the weather upon your skin, taste and smell the air. What do you observe when you let in all the details that surround you?

The practice of the sit spot has been a part of cultures around the world for many generations. It has been a way to observe and make sense of the natural world. Though we may have developed widespread comprehensive technology to solve our scientific questions for us, the process of the sit spot is not about answers but about the human skill of learning from observation. The sit spot practice provides students the opportunity to learn through observation in a natural, low stakes setting. Through routinely engaging in the practice, students can cultivate the ability to record and express ideas using descriptive details to strengthen their thinking and communication skills. For instance, common personal narrative writing assignments in the ELA classroom often ask students to recall and write of past experiences. Teachers usually desire their students to visualize a moment that defines them; but often the process of looking back can detract from the ability to produce highly descriptive writing. Though the scene may be still and quiet, there is value in capturing the present moment.

Studies have shown that spending time in nature can reduce symptoms related to stress, anxiety, and other mental health problems. Researchers out of the University of Chicago note, “Green spaces near schools

promote cognitive development in children and green views near children's homes promote self-control behaviors... And experiments have found that being exposed to natural environments improves working memory, cognitive flexibility and attentional control, while exposure to urban environments is linked to attention deficits" (Weir). Considering the current state of the mental health crisis society faces, our students are more in need of strategies to manage their mental health. The sit spot provides students with the opportunity to learn and develop a coping strategy. It may also help with turning the observational thinking inward, considering one's own physical and thought patterns and developing methods such as journaling or descriptive communication that can help students talk about the personal as well as societal issues that may be causing stress and anxiety.

It is important for students to learn to slow down, acknowledge the present moment, and connect with their environment. Though the practice of learning through observation of the physical world to gather knowledge about patterns, concepts, communication, and self-reflection is not currently widely practiced in traditional educational settings, I hope this unit helps educators acknowledge the importance of people and place. Through this original unit, students are called to think critically about their personal connection to nature, their relationship to the outdoors, but even more about the need to understand the connections all living things share and the protections we must work towards to ensure a healthy future for all life on our planet.

### **Learning Activity**

1. Establishing a Learning Journal: Throughout the unit, students learn content, concepts, and skills necessary to keep in mind so they can build further knowledge. Students are therefore asked to develop a learning journal. Students are guided to use the journal as a place for free-writes, notetaking, journaling, observations, drawings, and metacognitive reflection. The learning journal thus serves as a record for academic and personal growth.

## **Part I: Nature and Me**

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### **Personal Reflections on Nature**

The first part of the unit focuses on the concept of one's relationship with nature. The students I teach come from both densely urban environments and spacious suburbs, and each carries with them a unique relationship to the natural world. For some individuals, nature is a small tree outside a window of a four-story building; and for others, its summer camping trips in the mountains or lakeside retreats. From our diversity of experiences, comes a universal understanding that nature touches our lives in some specific and immediate way. To illustrate this point, students are invited to experience and write about a sit spot.

To inspire and practice narrative writing, students first experience the sit spot. In this variation, we spend time sitting and writing in various environments, our school parking lot, the local park, and the wharf, all within walking distance to our school community. At the sit spot, students are provided with a variety of prompts. One prompt focuses on building observational skills in response to our direct environment; students are asked to record and detail the sensory experience in each scene. In another prompt, students are asked to write about a memory that the location reminds them of and be inspired by the scene to once again practice including sensory details. Through narrative writing practice, students build their capacity to use specific details specifically to communicate their personal experiences. By implementing detailed and supported

writing this way, students are able to use hands-on experience to foster skills in a low stakes environment. This also helps foster a class writing practice that welcomes experimentation and creativity.

To strengthen the connection between individual and nature, students also participate in the process of planting, growing, and tending to a potted plant. In this way, students share in a shared class experience that simultaneously individually and collectively engages each student in forging a closer relationship with nature. As the plant grows, students are asked to keep a journal where they informally write observational records on the development of their plant as well as creative writing assignments related to the growing process. When in the planting phase, students consider their origins and contemplate questions such as, how have you or your family planted your roots? In the seedling stage, students encounter questions such as, how has your family's story grown and how are you a part of it? Then in the blooming stage, students consider, what is required to bloom and how do you think you will bloom? Throughout the process, students draw parallels between their lives and their plants' life with the intention of calling attention to both our natural progression as living things and their relationship to nature via plants.

### **Nature and a Transforming Environment**

For students, who may often find themselves void of nature through lack of exposure or experience, it may be difficult to acknowledge the deep historical impact nature has had on societal movements, including their place sitting in the classroom today. This is especially true for my urban students and students of color, as most high school humanities' curriculum tend to take white western perspectives of land ownership and acquisition in the US. Thus, next portion of this unit moves from the personal into the historical and cultural connections we have to the natural world and our place in it. Together we explore how our individual cultural and ancestral backgrounds were bound to the lands we come from and the formation of the land on which we now reside. This objective is accomplished by the study of place in poetry and literature, as well as through the observations we make in the neighborhood our school resides in.

This portion of the unit works in tandem with the U.S. History course as the class reviews pre-Columbian, colonial, revolutionary, and industrial periods. Concepts covered include: Colonization, Immigration, Migration, pre-Columbian Civilization, Gold Coast, Transatlantic Slave Trade, Constitutional Convention, Industrial Revolution, Indian Removal Act, Civil War, 13th Amendment, Indigenous, Industrialization, Environmentalism. Meanwhile, to help establish connections between past and present and people and place, the English class focuses on these historical periods and themes through literature. While not covering up the history of Eurocentric violence, the unit will also not only address the trauma of black and indigenous people in relation to the land but also will also greatly emphasis the personal, cultural, and spiritual connections POC have continuously held with nature.

Throughout the unit, students read a variety of poetry, historical fiction, and nonfiction. First students spend time reading selected poems from the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, engaging in verses on cultivating gardens, taking in the ocean, defeating cockroaches, and anthropomorphizing yellow jackets from poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, Wanda Coleman, Natasha Trethewey. In each poem, students will unique perspectives on the way individuals interact with the comical, calming, or unexpected elements of nature. To further expand on relationships with the land, students explore José Olivarez's *Citizen Illegal* through which he meditates on his experiences living in Chicago in contrast to his Mexican parents and ancestors' experiences with the desert landscape that surrounded their immigration journey. Olivarez's poems help establish the concept of how my urban students may interact with the nature in their cityscape while also asking them to consider their familial or cultural



relationship to the land that extends beyond their immediate experience. The class also dives into the novel *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, a historical novel that traces the descendants of two half-sisters, born into different villages in Ghana and the parallel experiences as one begins a line of descendants in the Gold Coast while the other is sold into slavery. The novel provides historical context, but also includes rich imagery and themes that depict the ways the natural environment affects the movement of people and the development of culture. Together, in class we focus on main passages that reflect generational change and movement in relation to land.

To accompany our readings, students also take a walking field trip to Long Wharf Park. The wharf, which lines the coast of the Long Island sound, provides layers of historical context through observation alone. Taking in only the natural features of the wharf at first, students are be asked to speculate through observation about the type of environment and the inhabitants of the land that would have resided there before the start of the New Haven colony. We discuss the Quinnipiac people of the Algonquin tribe and read nonfiction accounts of their interactions with the ecosystem. Moving forward in history, we inquire about the formation of the New Haven colony and question why this specific spot was chosen and what benefits the land possessed for colonization? Upon further exploration of the wharf, we navigate towards the site of The Amistad and discuss the forced movement of enslaved, such as the people of Mendeland (present-day Sierra Leon), to New Haven. Next, observing the building surrounding the area, we discuss the way in which new technologies, beginning in the industrial to modern period, were constructed around the wharf and the impact industry had on the shifting population. Lastly, after taking note of the Gulf Oil gas tanks, we discuss the environmental impact of industrial development on the land and the impact fossil fuels have on the ecosystem. Students are asked to consider ethical questions such as what impact do fossil fuels have on our local and global communities and what steps we can take to improve environmental health.

While engaging in text and hands-on experience, students use their understanding of the movement of people and the transformation of environment to create a collaborative timeline that demonstrates both a historical perspective on the major US events as well as a local outlook on the changes at Long Wharf. Students are asked to make thematic connections between historical fiction and nonfiction and use specific dates and analysis of events to support these themes. As a result, students are able to use observations to understand and create a narrative of the relationship of land and people.

Overlooking the in-your-face oil tanks and barges in the wharf may trigger despair and anger over the ability for men to ruin a once thriving and picturesque ecosystem with no regard for those in the community. The presence fossil fuels and pollution signifies the lack of care for the natural world for gain of capital. In this lineage, it is easy to wonder, when people will begin to value the life native to the land. Ecologist and writer, Robin Kimmerer shares her thoughts on the connection between indigenous people and their spiritual understanding of stewardship for the land. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer posits, “Immigrants cannot by definition be indigenous. Indigenous is a birthright word. No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land...But if people do not feel “indigenous,” can they nevertheless enter into the deep reciprocity that renews the world? (Kimmerer, 213). Our evolving industrial landscapes certainly continue to turn away from Kimmerer’s hopeful consideration that immigrants, but especially capitalist who seek to reap and sell what they take from the land, may learn to recognize the natural world as a home that should be cared for as it provides the basic needs for living. Kimmer continues, “Maybe the task assigned to Second Man is to unlearn... Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your Spirit...To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do” (Kimmerer, 214).

Perhaps Kimmerer's outlook is apparent in the grassroots organizing of indigenous Water Protector movements. The water protector name, analysis and style of activism arose from Indigenous communities in North America during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. The grassroots movement of water protectors is also well depicted in the documentary *There's Something in The Water*, which tells the story of a community activists embark on a crusade to protect the environment from landfills and pollutants in Nova Scotia. What these movements share at its core is the necessitation of indigenous peoples to take a stand against corporate organizations and governing bodies to protect health and preservation of their both in one spiritual and physical lands. Though these movements are lead fiercely by indigenous leaders and community, they slowly grow to engage the power of naturalized community members. Though the fight may end in some success or remain in contention, it is stronger with the collaboration of all who call the land home.

As I ask students to consider their connection to land, an environment that they be brand knew to, unfamiliar with, or even rejected by, it is my responsibility to foster a similarly deep understanding of stewardship for the environment. As students learn about the history of the wharf and grapple with their personal relationship with nature, they cannot simply look away from the negative impacts of over-industrialization and capitalist pursuits. When faced with the ramifications that these forces have on their current quality of life and the quality of life they deserve, teachers should provide students models to learn how everyday people can educate and mobilize for change. Finding themselves aligned as naturalized people of the same place, teachers and students can mobilize for change together.

### **Learning Activities**

1. Sit Spot Journaling: The sit spot journaling (part of the learning journal) is an activity used in tandem with the sit spot process. Students are sometimes asked to respond to a specific prompt during or after a session or may be able to select from a list of questions. Suggested prompts:
  - Sight, smell, touch, sound, and taste. List and describe the details that are stimulating your 5 senses in your sit spot.
  - Identify a living thing within your gaze. Using as much detail as possible, use sensory detail to describe why this being has caught your attention. Then write a short explanation of lessons people can learn from this living thing. Example: Plants need sunshine, air, and water to thrive. What can people learn from the needs of plants?
  - Look at the landscape around you. What details in the setting are natural, what details are man-made? How do natural and man-made things impact each other in this very spot you are sitting in?
2. Planting Observations: Each student is be provided with a small pot (or cup), a seed, and soil. Together as a class, students plant and mark their seed. Students are responsible for the growth and maintenance of their plant. As we engage in the planting, growing, and seedling process, students are asked to detail the upkeep of their plant, the observations they witness, and their thoughts and feelings towards the process.
3. "Where I'm From" Poem: Based on the George Ella Lyon poem "Where I'm From" students write a structured poem that includes descriptions of nature in their lives as well as family members and loved ones to create a poem that reflects their childhood and family history.
4. Personal Narrative: After learning about and further contemplating the connection between people and place, students write a personal narrative that reflects on a memory from a place that has a lasting impact on their character or memory. Students are challenged to use sensory detail and imagery as emphasized in previous activities. It is important that students have had the opportunity to practice



writing detailed observations and reflections prior to beginning the personal narrative.

5. Novel Jigsaw Reading Presentation: As students read selected passages of *Homegoing* as a class, they are responsible for working in small groups to present a portion of the reading. Students become experts on the narrative, theme, and character development as well as relay important information about how the section portrays the movement of people and impact of place. The class pieces the entire narrative together and learn through their peers about the timeline of the novel.
6. New Haven Timeline of Movement of People: This is an ongoing activity that physically takes shape in the hallway between the English and History classrooms. Here, sophomores collaborate in creating a multimedia timeline of the movement of people in New Haven (specifically the Long Island Sound). As students learn about the pre-Columbian to post-civil war era, students keep records of immigration and impact on land by adding points to a timeline. Students also further add to the timeline as they make observations of Long Wharf. Additions to the timeline may include: captions, paintings, photographs, primary documents, personal reflections. All members of the school community are able to witness the development of the timeline and learn from their peers about the environment in which their school is located.

## Part II: Nature Matters

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### Wilderness So White

DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS (c) A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. (Wilderness Act 1964)

In interrogating the history of the movement of people and the impact on land, students ultimately have to confront the white, Eurocentric narratives of wilderness. From the doctrine of manifest destiny to the development of a National Park system, white colonists and explorers have dominated the national perspective on the concept of wilderness. Romantic poets and writers of the 19th century glorify wilderness as an untouched, pristine, environment that has not been touched by human enterprise. American history teaches the immorality of the slavery and the genocide of indigenous folks of the Americas, but at the same time uphold the legacies of white plantation owners and expeditioners. Even the Wilderness Act of 1964 use of phrases and words such as “untrammelled by man”, “primitive”, and “value” assert a colonist and capitalist definition of the wild.

N. Scott Momoday's prologue to *The Way to Rainy Mountain* provides a counter narrative to those traditionally

taught narratives. Momoday writes on his experience as a relative of the Cherokee Nation, having lived on and away from his family's traditional home. In his reflections, he shares his memory of his grandmother's deep relationship with the land, and the devastation of culture and religion do to the imposition of westerners. Momoday writes:

My grandmother had a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of mankind. There was a wariness in her, and an ancient awe. She was a Christian in her later years, but she had come a long way about, and she never forgot her birthright. As a child she had been to the Sun Dances; she had taken part in those annual rites, and by them she had learned the restoration of her people in the presence of Tai-me. She was about seven when the last Kiowa Sun Dance was held in 1887 on the Washita River above Rainy Mountain Creek. The buffalo were gone. In order to consummate the ancient sacrifice--to impale the head of a buffalo bull upon the medicine tree--a delegation of old men journeyed into Texas, there to beg and barter for an animal from the Goodnight herd. She was ten when the Kiowas came together for the last time as a living Sun Dance culture. They could find no buffalo; they had to hang an old hide from the sacred tree. Before the dance could begin, a company of soldiers rode out from Fort Sill under orders to disperse the tribe. Forbidden without cause, the essential act of their faith, having seen the wild herds slaughtered and left to rot upon the ground, the Kiowas backed away forever from the medicine tree. That was July 20, 1890, at the great bend of the Washita. My grandmother was there. Without bitterness, and for as long as she lived, she bore a vision of deicide. (Momoday, 2)

The grandmother's experience serves as a testament to the respect and reverence ingenious peoples hold for nature that is essential for the wellbeing of their community and way of life. Students need exposure to accounts like Momoday's to be able to disrupt the dominant white narrative of the American wilderness and to acknowledge the right to land that is indigenous to place and not forced upon by outsiders. To do so, teachers must provide narratives that depict the long-standing relationship of POC and the natural world and that share a truth that is often left out of history. Without teaching students to challenge Eurocentric perspectives, the educational system forges a narrative that quite literally extricates the ancestral knowledge and deeply rooted relationships black and indigenous peoples have held with the land for centuries and further remove students from nature.

To challenge the narrative of whom the wilderness is indented for, students need the opportunity to interact with the outdoors at their own accord through which they may cultivate rich and personal relationships with nature. Where I teach, we present this opportunity through the Wilderness Inspired Leadership Development (WILD) Program, a youth program with a mission to make the outdoors accessible and meaningful to youth living in urban and under-resourced communities. Through the program, students have the ability to engage in outdoor experiences such as camping, canoeing, hiking, and backpacking in both local and remote areas in New England. The school based program partners with Appalachian Mountain Club's Youth Opportunities Program, which "promotes youth leadership, confidence, and environmental awareness through participation in outdoor adventures...Because participation in these types of outdoor activities has traditionally been limited to those with greater financial resources, YOP prioritizes agencies serving youth from urban and under-resourced communities...[making] it possible for diverse groups of young people to get outdoors together" (Appalachian Mountain Club). The program provides opportunities and exposure that was once very limited.

Students engaging in the WILD program have the ability to further their relationship with the wilderness by developing personal experiences and skills that can provide a foundation for the future. In part, through their participation, students not only break barriers for themselves but also for their community by sharing their

experiences with friends, family, and others who may not have had exposure to the outdoors. Students are asked to keep note of the observations on nature and new skills they gain while participating in the program. Keeping record of these moments and reflections deeply solidify the experience in their memories and allow students to relay accurately their experiences to the community. The hope is that students help create a school culture that is excited to engage with nature and defy stigma surrounding who the wilderness is for. In this way, students lead through example and become advocates for their peers and representation in the outdoor industry.

## **Environmental Justice**

When students can recognize their connection to the natural world, they can then begin more closely to observe societal impacts and perspectives on the environment. Youth have the ability to make a remarkable impact on local and global environmental justice issues and to help students better understand the concept of environmental justice. To gain a further foundation for the development of grassroots movements, students learn the principles of the movement as outlined by the delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held on October 24-27, 1991, in Washington DC. The 17 principles of Environmental Justice have served as a defining document for the growing grassroots movement for environmental justice.

We the people of color, gathered together at this multinational People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, to begin to build a national and international movement of all peoples of color to fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities, do hereby re-establish our spiritual interdependence to the sacredness of our Mother Earth; to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves; to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples, do affirm and adopt these Principles of Environmental Justice. (Delegates to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit)

In US History class, students learn of the formation and jurisdiction of constitutional rights, but they are aware that the representatives who have historically and presently governed and aided in creation of these rights do not understand student perspectives or experiences. It is therefore important that these students are able to read principles and rights created by grassroots movements and community representatives who have similar perspectives, cultures, and desires and to acknowledge the actions those are taking to fight for Environmental Justice.

To model engaging in the creation and formation of principles and rights, students are provided the opportunity to create an amendment to propose in addition to develop a school wide bill of rights. To parallel this activity in English class students create a proposal on environmental justice issues that our school community faces. To gather understanding of environmental issues on a local level, we look to environmental organizations in our city such as impact on pollinators, protecting natural lands, and working towards climate justice.

A few leading environmental justice grassroots organizations include The New Haven Huneebee Project, Save the Sound, and New Haven Climate Movement. Each organization, though collectively fighting for environmental justice, works towards change in a specialized method. For instance, The Huneebee Project

specifically works with honeybees to promote the growth of pollinator population within the city of New Haven. Honeybees are the species most commonly used as commercial pollinators, pollinating over 100 crops grown in North America and contributing \$15 billion to the US economy yearly. Honeybees also pollinate wild and native plants, thus contributing to all the environmental and societal benefits attributed to pollinators. Therefore, New Haven Huneebee Project “envisions a world in which our youth, the community, and our environment are in a mutual and collaborative relationship. Through a social enterprise that promotes transferable job-skill-building for youth, community engagement, and shared appreciation for our natural environment” (Huneebee Project). By engaging young people in the process of promoting the growth of pollinators, the project sustains its mission, passing on skills and knowledge necessary to combating the environmental impacts.

Then there are movements created and lead by youth, and thus share common generational perspectives and a collective sense of urgency. For instance, the New Haven Climate Movement, which is mostly comprised of high school and college representatives, is an inter-generational grassroots organization of New Haven area residents. Together, the organization pushes for strong action on climate change in New Haven by mobilizing community residents and local organizations to learn about and act on the climate emergency. They fight for government policies and investments that will restore a safe climate and create a just future for all. The organizations goes beyond recognizing the natural environment to emphasizing the impact of the climate crises on health and living. The organization recognizes that the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect New Haven’s most vulnerable residents, which is why they believe that New Haven must take immediate action to address this emergency and must prioritize equity and justice in solutions (New Haven Climate Movement).

Other organizations also aid in leading environmental action with a more regional and comprehensive outreach approach. Save the Sound fights climate change, saves endangered lands, protects the Sound and its rivers, and works with nature to restore ecosystems of Connecticut and Long Island Sound. They use legal and scientific expertise and bring people together to achieve results that benefit the environment for current and future generations. The organization welcomes citizens from urban to rural communities to unite in transforming struggling habitats, polluted waters, endangered wildlife, and a threatened planet into resilient, healthy, vibrant, and inspiring places that sustain communities (Save the Sound). These types of organizations demonstrate to students a need to unite communities with the purpose of working towards the same goal: environmental justice.

In fact, people are organizing all over the world to put an end to the dire effects of the climate crisis. Project 350 is an international movement of ordinary people working to end the age of fossil fuels and build a world of community-led renewable energy for all (Project 350). The organizations provides a platform for individuals to get active in the climate movement and meet like-minded people no matter where one be in the globe. By using their organization locator map, one could also gain knowledge into the types of climate movements and programs located in near and far regions of the world and learn more about the specific ways people are working to reduce climate impact in their environment. Initiatives like those of Huneebee Project, Save the Sound, and New Haven Climate Movement are close to home reminders of the importance of environmental justice in our city and remind young people that they have the power to engage in working towards change. Project 350 provides a framework for understanding the global need to work together for a healthier planet and human race. By researching and hearing from these organizations, we can learn how to become a part of organization that are agents of change problem solvers as well as model our work to executing environmental justice initiatives in our school community.

## Learning Activities

1. Environmental Speaker Series: As mentioned above, New Haven is home to many environmental grassroots organizations that are currently working to make an impact on the local community. Students are able to connect and learn from leaders in these organizations through a speaker series. Leaders present on initiatives and projects, community issues, possible solutions, and opportunities for students to get involved. Students are asked to develop questions, as well as take notes on the style of the presentation, as they will be asked to present to the class and school community at the end of the year.
2. Environmental Proposal: After learning from activists and grassroots organizations, students work in small groups to develop a proposal for a school wide environmental initiative. Groups are responsible for determining a school based environmental need or issue, researching solutions for how to solve the issue and a plan for how to execute the solution. Students develop a short platform and presentation to deliver to the class and then the school community. The school community votes on the proposals and the most popular proposal will become the school's environmental initiative for the year.

## Conclusion

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The goal of The Urban, The Wilderness, and Me: An ELA Journey into Nature and Environmental Justice is to overall develop observational thinking and writing skills as foundations for personal narrative writing, historical analysis, and research based problem solving. Through engaging in nature writing and learning content through multiple perspectives and frames of thought, students have different entryways into their understanding of their personal, cultural, and ancestral connection to the land and the environment. The design of the unit also provides a preview of the work students independently engage in as they embark on the yearlong sophomore independent study of Social Justice Symposium. With the skills of creating personal connections, gathering observational data, researching historical implications, and finding local solutions, students will be prepared to select a social justice issue of their choice on which they will address and educate the school and local community.

I want my students to know that the wilderness is a place that cannot be contained by a single narrative but one that is full of multitudes that touch human lives with historic implications and present impact. Though they are a generation born with immense responsibility upon their shoulders in terms of the climate crisis, I want them to know through this unit and through my teaching practice that I stand with them and that together we can take action and create processes that change our community—that make a difference.

## Resources

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## **Suggested Student Reading and Viewing List**

### **Fiction and Poetry**

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. London, England: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1983.

Dungy, Camille. *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*. Athens (Ga.): University of Georgia Press, 2009.

Gyasi, Yaa. *Homegoing*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.

Lyon, George Ella. *Where I'm from: Where Poems Come From*. Spring, TX: Absey & Co., 1999.

Momaday, Navarre Scott, and Al Momaday. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969.

Olivarez, José. *Citizen Illegal: Poems*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2018.

### **Nonfiction**

"Complete Text of the Wilderness Act (Teaching Version)." Accessed July 7, 2022. [https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1981/upload/W-Act\\_508.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1981/upload/W-Act_508.pdf).

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### **Community Sources**

"About Us." nhclimatemovement. Accessed July 8, 2022.

<https://www.newhavenclimatemovement.org/copy-of-about-us>.

"Action for Our Region's Environment." Save the Sound. Accessed July 7, 2022.

<https://www.savethesound.org/>.

Huneebee Project. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.huneebeeproject.com/>.

Team, The Editorial, Santiago, Jenny Tuazon, and Jason Kirkpatrick and Miriam Eide. "A Global Campaign to Confront the Climate Crisis." 350. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://350.org/>.

### **Materials for Classroom Use**

Reading materials (as listed above)

Construction paper

Notebooks

Poster paper

Research database

Computer/laptop

Video projection

Planting materials

Seeds

Small pots or cups

Soil

Water

Outdoor access

Transportation to field trip sites

## Appendix on Implementing District Standards

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As a research unit within an English classroom context, the Inquiry and Research, Speaking and Listening, Writing, and Reading Standards are embedded into the content as well as lessons of this curriculum. By engaging in this unit of study, students will learn to use observational thinking, narrative, and research skills as well as grow their understanding of the connection between people and the environment. Students will engage in critical reading and analysis of nonfiction and historical and contemporary writing to inspire their own work. Students will sharpen their speaking and listening skills by engaging in conversations with leaders and members of their school and local community. Below is a summary of standards and skills students will focus on throughout the unit.

### **Inquiry and Research**

- Conduct research that shows differing perspectives of a topic
- Assess the credibility and accuracy of each source
- Select relevant information that advances my line of inquiry
- Develop and pursue questions to demonstrate and expand understanding of a subject

### **Speaking and Listening**

- Prepare for a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners (CCR.SL1)
- Participate in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners (CCR.SL1)
- Present information, findings, and supporting evidence appropriately for task, purpose, and audience (CCR.SL4)

### **Writing**

- Develop informative or explanatory writing to examine and convey complex ideas and information (CCR.W2)
- Use language appropriate for audience and purpose (CCR.L3)

### **Reading**

- Comprehend complex literary and informational texts by determining what the text says explicitly and what is implied (CCR.R1)
- Analyze the text to determine how author's choices relate to each other to shape the meaning of the work as a whole (CCR.R4-6)

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