



Introduction

by Jill Campbell

Black men building a Nation,
My Brother said, have no leisure like them
No right to waste at trees
Inventing names for wrens and weeds.
But it's when you don't care about the world
That you begin owning and destroying it
Like them.
Gerald Barrax Sr., "To Waste at Trees"

This year, when I told people the topic of the Teachers Institute seminar I was leading, they sometimes responded with surprise or even a bit of skepticism. "Writing About *Nature*?" – to some, that didn't sound like a subject with obvious relevance for students and teachers in New Haven Public Schools. By contrast, three years ago, when I mentioned the topic of my YNHTI seminar—"Digital Lives"—most people quickly grasped the importance of thinking about the place of digital media and digital devices in students' everyday 21st-century lives. As Daniel Croteau, one of the Fellows in our seminar, remarks at the beginning of his unit: "As an urban teacher, the idea of nature seems theoretical as the city is not the first place one visualizes when visualizing this concept. My students would agree with that. To my students, nature is not a tangible concept but something that is not available to them."

The sense of incongruity that seminar Fellows and I sometimes encountered between the subject of "nature" and assumptions about New Haven students' lives—and more pointedly, the gap Dan highlights when he notes his students' perception of nature as "something that is not available to them"—generated some of the most fundamental guiding questions for our work in the seminar: What does "Nature" mean, and where can it be found? Does the experience of nature belong to some people and not to others? How can students in the urban setting of New Haven have access to nature as a part of their daily experience and as a subject for their own writing?

We didn't aim to arrive at a definitive answer to the first of these questions, operating instead with an open-ended concept of nature and affirming that experiences of the natural world can be found in the city as well as in designated areas of "wilderness." But we pressed hard on the second and third of these questions, because to assume urban students' exclusion from a broadly-defined experience of nature is to accept a profound loss—and indeed, an injustice. A number of recent studies have demonstrated the significant and measurable benefits of time spent in "green spaces" (settings with natural elements, including within a city) to the physical, mental, and emotional health of both children and adults. Amy Brazauski, Michelle Romanelli, and Eden Stein each discuss some of this research in their units and describe their plans to provide opportunities for students to spend time outdoors and attending to the natural world during the school-day, building habits and practices of attention that will enhance their long-term sense of themselves and of the world.

The natural world elicits acts of close and patient observation from all the writers whose work we sampled in our shared readings for the seminar, whether scientists, environmentalists, poets, novelists, essayists, or writers of memoirs; and all the units developed in our seminar emphasize practices of close observation. The simple, reiterative methods of the "sit spot" and of nature-journaling support the development of these practices in several Fellows' units, whether designed for the Life Sciences, Art, or English classroom and for students in elementary, middle-school, or high-school grades. As Lauren Whitelaw, a Life Sciences teacher, remarks, all of the methods of scientific inquiry "stem from one skill: making observations"; while Amy Brazauski, an English teacher, points out that observational skills are essential to "reading comprehension, writing, and abstract thinking skills," and to both understanding and creating narrative. In a STEAM unit integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math, Stephanie Smelser prompts her middle-school Art students to discover the ubiquity of the spiral form in nature, from seashells to tornadoes, and invites them each to choose one spiral form to observe closely, to research, and to respond to in a work of original art.

Embodied, mindful, repeated experiences of nature can foster our students' sense of their own place in the world and cultivate their cognitive and intellectual skills. Observational practices may also be the basis of a more affective level of engagement and response—the kind of "care" for the world that the speaker of Gerald Barrax Sr.'s poem, "To Waste at Trees," finds lacking in "them," those (implicitly white people) who relate to the natural world only by "owning and destroying it." In our time of rapid climate change and environmental crisis, the consequences of relationships to nature that lack the dimension of "care" have become alarmingly clear: the natural world we live in is not a stable background, to be observed and appreciated when we wish – it is in imminent peril.

Although the study of writing about nature has often centered on a narrow tradition of white English and American men, we embraced and explored a more diverse range of perspectives on nature, especially emphasizing Black and Indigenous North American voices. In poems included in the anthology *Black Nature* (ed. Camille Dungy) and in writings by N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), and Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi), among others, we found an array of relationships to nature that do not take mastery, extraction, profit, and ownership as their premise. The curriculum units developed in our seminar do not focus primarily on climate change or environmental crisis; but our shared hope is that strengthening students' connections to nature will both provide them with a source of inner sustenance in our uncertain times and establish the basis for attending with care to the condition of our planet.

The units written for our seminar range widely in subject matter from study of weather and climate in a third-grade classroom (Michelle Romanelli) to plans for survival themed book clubs, embedded in a year-long series of opportunities for experiential learning outdoors (Eden C. Stein); from middle-school study of a graphic novel

featuring Native American origin stories, Matt Dembecki's *Trickster*, paired with oral storytelling (Daniel Croteau) to a scaffolded, multi-phase investigation of nature and environmental justice in a high-school English Language Arts classroom (Amy Brazauski); and from the practice of nature-journaling as a key element of scientific method in a Life Sciences class (Lauren Whitelaw) to a multi-disciplinary dive into the study of spirals form in middle-school Art (Stephanie Smelser). They all seek to advance students' capacities for close attention and observation, and for a sense of connection to nature—aiming, even, to renew young people's readiness to feel wonder.

It is the present and the possibilities of a future that must concern us. Ours is a damaged world. We humans have done the damage, and we must be held to account. We have suffered a poverty of the imagination, a loss of innocence. There was a time when "man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent," this New World, "commensurate to his capacity for wonder." I would strive with all my strength to give that sense of wonder to those who will come after me.

--N. Scott Momaday, *Earth Keeper: Reflections on the American Land*

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