

Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
Seminar Description for 2022
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“Writing About Nature”

What is “Nature”? What is the impact of attention to nature on various forms of writing—poetry, fiction, memoirs, essays, scientific prose? In turn, what impact might writing in any or all of these forms have on the future of Earth’s natural world—its animals, plants, ecosystems, and wild places? Does nature as a subject matter 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? What might attending to elements of nature in any setting offer a writer? Has writing about nature changed in the 21st century?

The seminar will address this range of open-ended questions by sampling writing about nature in a variety of genres from the 18th century to the present, exploring several long-standing literary conceptions of Nature: as a source of restoration and spiritual renewal (in, for example, the poetry and journals of William and Dorothy Wordsworth); as a place of solitude and introspection (famously, in the works of Thoreau, Edward Abbey, and Annie Dillard); as a repository of deep cultural meaning and history (in the poetry of Langston Hughes, Rita Dove, Alice Oswald, Joy Harjo, Jericho Brown), as a realm of wildness outside of social influence and artifice; as the site of scientific evidence, universal principles, and systems of knowledge (for Linneaus, Darwin, and many others).

The seminar will also consider the special urgency and challenge of thinking and writing about “nature” in our particular time—in the age of the Anthropocene, when the effects of human actions reach every corner of the Earth, including its oceans, as climate change threatens the balance of ecosystems everywhere and mass extinctions loom. We will sample texts in which an ecological awareness emerged from close, daily attention to the natural world, including works by Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson, as well as more recent statements on climate change by writers such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Elizabeth Kolbert. We will look to writers who approach nature from a range of cultural perspectives, including the Black ornithologist J. Drew Lanham and the Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, widening our conception of who cares about nature and offering alternatives to the European-American investment in scientific mastery and industrial progress.

The range of readings relevant to the seminar’s subject is vast, and the final choice of shared readings will be shaped by the subject matter and grade level of teachers participating in the seminar. We will certainly consider some writing about nature for children and young adults, including the pairing of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* and Louise Erdrich’s *The Birchbark House* and the picture books *We Are Water Protectors* and *Margarito’s Forest/ El Bosque de Don Margarito*. The subject matter of the seminar is interdisciplinary, and contributions of teachers of STEM subjects would be invaluable if the study of writing about nature will enhance their teaching and their curriculum plans.