

# Growing the Green Unknown: Teaching Environmental Literature in Southeastern North Carolina

## Breaking Ground: A New Course Sprouts

Walking to class, we're still lesson planning. Indeed, although we had thought about and discussed since we were hired in fall 2006 the idea of team-teaching an environmental literature class from the perspectives of our disciplinary specialties (American Indian Studies for Jane, African American literature for Scott), our class still was a work in progress. We were excited on this first day of our brand new course at the University of North Carolina, Pembroke, "Literatures of Ecoliteracy and Environmental Justice," the first ever of its kind here. Despite its evolving character, our collaboration was strong, for we were united in our convictions: respecting our students, their communities, and their heritages; enacting environmental justice; and reconnecting ourselves, our students, and our university to our shared world.

Even now, we remain inspired by the course. It still prompts us to think about our relationships to our environment, especially as we make our home in a place different from where we grew up. What's more, it allowed us to get to know our students in new, more personal ways, as those from Robeson County gave force and shape to the love of their homeland, while those from outside the community—from places as near as the North Carolina foothills and coast,

as far as Philadelphia and Brooklyn—reflected on their own commitments to Pembroke.

On that first day of class, we decided at the last minute to switch the order of our morning's activities. We opted instead to ask students to write about their views of nature and place, environmental literature, and environmental justice. Then, with those ideas on paper, we would introduce ourselves to each other.

"That'll be more dynamic than starting with another boring syllabus review, don't you think?" Jane asked her chronically agreeable collaborator.

"Absolutely."

This bit of dumb luck became an episode of accidental brilliance, and, as it turned out, one of many accidents that kept this pilot course a vibrant work-in-progress from start to finish. On the blackboard, Scott wrote the questions we had brainstormed earlier: "What does it mean to be 'ecoliterate'? What is 'environmental justice'? What is 'sustainability'? How do people relate to place? What is the relationship between ecoliteracy and environmental justice? What is your place in the world?" The question we really focused on called forth Wendell Berry: "To know who you are, you have to know where you are. Who, and where, are you?" With those questions on the board and our students furiously scribbling, we never made it to the syllabus that morning. Instead, the students' discussion of their place in the world and its relationship to our course themes just popped. These questions, we came to learn, would inspire our students and us even beyond the term of our August to December course.

### Up from the Roots: Who and Where We Are

Who and where we are, are two educators from both sides of the United States and eleven students whose "races" and numbers roughly reflected the triracial demographics of our university. Committed to enacting what bell hooks terms "engaged pedagogy" in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), we wrote with students on the same questions that morning. Because the conversation was so lively; however, not everyone was able to read her or his response in class; consequently, after class we opened our first Blackboard Discussion Board. Jane posted first, to let students to know that she, as a native of California, a San Franciscan for fifteen years, a person composed of oak groves, orange groves, redwoods, and freeways, definitely does not feel "in place" in rural southeastern North Carolina. Born and raised in North Carolina, Scott described

his relationship to place as a coupling of rural southeastern environmental sensibilities that are his historical inheritance with twenty-first-century consumer culture conveniences. Like our own, our students' relationships to homelands, home places, and the multiple environments we inhabit ranged from a deep connectedness to the natural world to a sense of dislocation from both home and school environments. Addison, a young white man from Robeson County, wrote of his love of nature, because "as an Eagle Scout [he] spent much of [his] time growing up outdoors. Every month [his] troop would take a camping trip to a new location and observe the land and learn to use it in new ways to benefit us, but not harm the environment. Nothing could be more relaxing than a night in the woods surrounded by the warmth of a burning fire" (McMillan 1). Jennie, a young white woman whose home place is Perquimans County, North Carolina, responded to Jane on Blackboard that what the California native had written mirrored her own feelings: "I live about 4 hours from Pembroke, I know some people are from much further, but sometimes because of dialect and the way I see the world I feel out of place with my friends here. Some weeks here are harder for me than others. At home there is that familiarity and the anniversary of some things are really hard for me to handle now that I'm not home" (Harris). Sunshine, half Lumbee and half Italian, was raised in Philadelphia until returning to Pembroke for college; Tamara, an African American mother and grandmother, hailed from New York City before moving to North Carolina at age twenty-one. These women shared with Jane an acute sense of both urban and rural experiences, though neither student had considered the urban landscapes of their childhoods as an "environment" in the stereotypical ways that sandy beaches and fields of wildflowers signal "environment" for many. This cross-section of student expressions of place and space would prove fertile soil for the interplay of ideas our readings generated.

At the close of our first class—which ran slightly over time—our students had already formed bonds with one another; we were energized. As she walked out the door, Tamara smiled and said, "I'm going to love this class. I feel like I've found my niche. I'm gonna tell other people to take it!" Coming across an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Colleges Get Greener in Operations," but Not in Teaching," further invigorated us later that day. The article reported that while colleges nationwide had made tremendous gains in writing sustainability plans, recycling, increasing energy efficiency, xeriscaping, and hiring sustainability managers, they had regressed in infusing environmental sustainability in their curricula. Yet we

130 were motivated by the challenges we faced—a campus with a dys-  
functional recycling program, a chancellor who believed that water  
conservation during a drought meant getting water from wells  
("Water conservation measures" 1), and only a handful of faculty  
135 interested in offering an environmental studies curriculum. For us, it  
was about more than greening our campus and the courses the uni-  
versity offered, as our scholarship and values are founded on human  
rights, social justice, and community and planetary health. It's not an  
overstatement that to us, greening our university's curriculum means  
140 life and death, survival and extinction.

145 As we knew going into the course, Robeson County and south-  
eastern North Carolina—UNCP's primary constituency, the part of  
the state along and east of Interstate 95—have borne and continue to  
bear the brunt of multiple disparagements. The region's vulnerability  
prompted former U.S. Senator Elizabeth Dole to call for the establish-  
ment of a "Southeastern Crescent Authority" modeled after the  
Appalachian Regional Commission:

150 It is largely rural, and it is significantly poorer. It is in  
these parts of North Carolina where educational attain-  
ment tends to be lower and unemployment rates tend  
to be higher. . . . The challenges of globalization have  
landed smack on the shoulders of the region's textile  
mill towns, tobacco producing areas, and furniture  
155 manufacturing communities. It is also in these parts of  
North Carolina where the rates of health problems,  
such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity, are  
well above average. Just consider this, if the region east  
of Interstate 95 in North Carolina were its own state, it  
would rank 50th in terms of premature mortality. . . .

160 [M]y aim is certainly not to paint a depressing  
picture of rural North Carolina; rather, I describe this  
all-too-often overlooked part of my state so that this  
subcommittee understands the tremendous opportunity  
that SECA holds for . . . areas that while distressed, still  
165 hold great promise. ("Dole Touts Bill")

To polluters, the region's social, political, and economic vulnerability  
makes it seductive. Despite the former senator's condemnation of the  
region's woes, the kind of economic "investment" that is happening  
and is slated to happen is not helping the region—all the more  
170 important given today's economic recession. The foundations of  
environmental justice—that environmental degradation happens  
where the people are least white and least wealthy—holds true for

175 this region as well. The list of the region's grievances must start with  
the explosion, beginning in the mid-1990s, of hog farming, histori-  
cally attracted Down East because of the state's lax regulations and  
the region's disempowered, struggling demographics. Today North  
180 Carolina ranks No. 2 in the nation in the production of hogs. Those  
hogs—about 10 million—are concentrated in the eastern half of the  
state, and the environmental problems they spawn are legion: tons of  
urine and feces, broken lagoons, gallons of spills, inescapable odor  
and air pollution, and the severe, widespread diminishment of water-  
sheds, estuaries, and wildlife (“Industrial Hog Operations”). And if  
factory farms aren't bad enough, the region has faced down the  
185 threat of multistate megadumps—at least for now.

185 It is because of our regional challenges and opportunities that we  
believed our course would serve critical needs for our students and  
shared communities. As faculty who work with students of color  
from Robeson and surrounding counties (areas that are predomi-  
nantly African and Native American), we can testify to the power of  
190 civic engagement and service learning that facilitate campus and  
community enrichment and privilege the intellectual capital of local  
students and communities. Likewise, as scholars who take seriously  
the interpenetrations of place and culture, justice and sustainability,  
peace and preservation, we believe in the power of restoring not only  
195 landscapes but that of restoring people to their landscapes and to  
each other.

With these as our guiding principles and generous grants from  
our university's Office of Academic Affairs and Teaching & Learning  
200 Center, we began the pleasurable task of selecting course texts and  
activities.

## Nurturing Growth: What We Read and How We Read It

### 205 The Street by Ann Petry

During registration, many students dropped by or e-mailed to ask  
us what the course would be about. Their confusion took the form of  
the following question, roughly speaking: “Environmental litera-  
210 ture—is that, like, about that guy who lived in a cabin by some pond  
and wrote about ants or something?” Our opening readings—the  
Indigenous Environmental Network's “Native Perspective on WHAT  
is ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE?,” the First National People of Color  
Environmental Leadership Summit's “Principles of Environmental  
Justice” (1991), the United Church of Christ Racial Justice  
215 Commission's *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States: A National*

Report on the Racial and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites (1987), and the United Nations' Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)—threw them for a loop. "Where's nature?" seemed to be the simmering tacit question. In these texts, there were no visible puffy white clouds, no audible babbling brooks, and no chirping birds. These introductory readings began productively to unsettle students' preexisting notions of "environment."

Then Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) knocked them off their feet. Accepting the African American writer's postwar naturalist novel as "environmental literature" meant accepting some radical propositions: first, that "environment" might be defined as both Thoreau's pond and inner-city New York; second, that one's relationship to one's environment might consist not in dominating one's surroundings, but in being oppressed by them instead; and third, that seeing Petry's Harlem as a community worth fighting for might recast southeastern North Carolina as a region equally worth taking on megadumpers and agribizpigs for. Students' secondary readings for *The Street*—Michael Bennett's "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery" (2001), Colin Fisher's "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot" (2006), and a chapter from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)—solidified these objectives, just as our visit to a nearby farm, Sunset Ranch Organics, owned and managed by Tupac Shakur's mother and stepfather, further deepened our notions of what counts as environment and environmental literature.

Despite their initial shock, students came to understand our reasoning in assigning as the first salvo in our class a book about the inner city, a landscape as tough as the arctic or desert, a geography where trees and open space are reserved for upper-class exurban whites. "I must admit that when I enrolled in this class my first idea of 'Literatures of Ecoliteracy' was writing about nature: trees, flowers, mountains and the like," Grey wrote "I now know, however, that ecoliteracy encompasses so much more. If we maintain that ecoliterate literature is only about nature, or only about people's experiences with the natural world, we alienate people, especially people of color. Not everyone is able to enjoy, or wants to enjoy, nature in the conventional sense" (Sweeney, "Response Paper #2," 1). To put it mildly, *The Street* contests "nature in the conventional sense," just as it complicates naturalism in its conventional sense. A naturalist novel like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), *The Street* tells the story of Lutie Johnson, an African American wife, single mother, and worker in

260 mid-1940s Harlem. A blistering critique in the vein of Frank Norris's  
*The Octopus* (1901), Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), and John  
Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1937), Petry's novel exposes the city's  
substandard housing stock, suggests that pollution causes mental  
and physical defect, likens a shameful education system to a prison,  
265 reveals discrimination in healthcare, and confronts workplace miso-  
gyny and sexual harassment.

Yet Petry's novel couples a moral worldview to its pervasive eco-  
logical grammar. It implicitly criticizes spatial inequalities, in which  
wealthy white capitalists (embodied by the Chandlers, Lutie's  
employer) inhabit lush, green landscapes outside the city while a  
270 black underclass struggles to survive in a crowded, dirty, polluted  
ghetto. This inequality expresses itself in parodies of white environ-  
mental aesthetics, such as Lutie's ironic appreciation of an inner-city  
sunset: even as "a blaze of brilliant color . . . bathed the street in a  
glow of light," "a boy fish[ed] through a grating in the street," where  
275 "odds and ends had floated down under the sidewalk" (62–63, 65).  
Unlike the wealthy Chandlers' pristine river and the piazza that  
affords them the view they enjoy, Lutie's is a stream of underground  
sewage, made inescapable by the sun's piercing rays. As she knows,  
hers is the neighborhood that takes in the "pigs' feet, hog maw, neck  
bones, chitterlings, ox tails, tripe . . . sleazy blouses . . . all the bruised  
rotten fruit and vegetables . . . the leavings, the sweepings, the  
impossible unsalable merchandise, the dregs and dross that were  
reserved especially for Harlem," where its inhabitants survive in  
spite of, not thanks to, their environment (153). In the lingo of the  
280 modern environmental justice movement, *The Street* narrates the exis-  
tentialism of "PIBBY"—"place in blacks' backyards," a principle  
Robert D. Bullard explores in depth in *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class,  
and Environmental Quality* (2000).

290 Students responded to the novel viscerally, infuriated equally by  
Lutie's actions (in particular abandoning her son) and the environ-  
mental conditions that informed her worldview and curtailed her  
agency. While racism, classism, and sexism were hardly abstract  
notions to them, they had not thought before of these forces as  
"environmental." They were aghast at the myriad ways that racism,  
295 classism, and sexism infiltrated and structured the environment,  
what they had thought of as some sort of neutral playing field, just  
as they were adamant in extrapolating new concepts of what, after  
all, "environment" really entailed. Sunshine, for example, invoked  
Fanon to see the environment as a force that could prompt radical  
self-revisioning: "Even though they were located in different  
300 countries, Lutie Johnson and Fanon both experienced a lot of the

same prejudice, as they tried to better themselves as young Black people. When people began to put them inside of a box they both found the strength and the means to fight back” (Costanzo, “Response Paper #2,” n.p.)

For Tamara, however, blackness became an environment itself. Quoting Lutie’s assertion that “[i]t must be hate that made them wrap all Negroes up in a neat package labeled ‘colored’; a package that called for certain kinds of jobs and a special kind of treatment” (Petry 72), Tamara wrote, “[Lutie] questioned her self, her color, and her mental state.” That “[Lutie’s] determination and motivation was to make enough money to leave the place that she referred to as the ‘god-damned street’ ” saddened Tamara, for it demonstrated the irreconcilable chasm between black experience and black survival in a racist, environmentally unjust structure (White-Chambers 3). The logical end, as Grey wrote, was full retreat from the environment, into one’s physical and psychological self, which is its own environment not only for black bodies but for all bodies: “Environment is . . . our very own bodies, and . . . our very own minds. Our sense of identity is essential to our sense of our environment. If we feel alone or alienated that is an environment we inhabit” (Sweeney, “Response Paper #2,” 1). For us and our students, these definitions of environment—as simultaneously natural, spatial, cultural, social, psychological, and spiritual—compelled hard thinking about social and environmental justice: How do we create a socially just, environmentally sustainable city, as Fisher explores in the 1919 riot of Chicago, when two African American boys swimming in a “white” part of Lake Michigan ignited a white backlash? How do we account for diverse visions of the environment, the legacy of raced, gendered, sexed, and classed histories, as Bennett and Fanon theorize?

As if we needed a counterimage to the counterimage of “environment” provided by *The Street*, we journeyed past Interstate 95 and its cancer of fast food, gas stations, and motels to Sunset Ranch, a certified organic farm founded by Afeni Shakur-Davis and her husband, Dr. Gust Davis Jr. outside Lumberton. To our minds, Sunset Ranch would tell of an African American woman coming home and reclaiming what might seem to some an irredeemable postindustrial wasteland. We envisioned Shakur-Davis’s creation of Sunset Ranch as an uplifting alternative ending to the bleak conclusion of Lutie’s story. The farm’s biodiversity, and farmworkers Kevin and Cay Hunt’s stewardship, excited the senses. “The landscape from the ranch was beautiful,” Kristen wrote (Hobbs 3). Sunshine concurred: “It is easy to sense that the land is alive. . . . When the wind blows, you find yourself overcome with a refreshing calming feeling”



345 (Costanzo, “[Response Paper #1](#),” 1). We agreed, enjoying the care the  
Hunts showed for the farm animals, walking down the perfectly  
sown rows of arugula just beginning to sprout, and hearing about  
the Shakur-Davises’ plans for the farm’s future.

350 Yet we also wanted our students to consider the full picture: that  
the farm’s produce is shipped nationwide, while localharvest.org (in  
fall 2008) showed only three farmer’s markets and no community-  
supported agriculture within twenty-five miles of UNCP; that differ-  
ent histories and negotiated arrangements of race and class (the  
355 African American experience of the Shakur-Davises and the Lumbee  
experience of the Hunts) are worth exploring; and that realities of  
capital and labor remain thorny as citizens move toward environ-  
mentally and economically sustainable agriculture.

While some students confronted these issues in online postings  
after visiting the farm—Grace, for example, asked, “I wonder if [the  
360 Hunts] feel chained to the land in the same way that Lutie dreamed  
that the super was chained to the building (Petry 191–193)?”  
(Yusckat 2)—not all of them were ready to shake their faith in the  
restorative power of country life. Though *The Street* and Sunset Ranch  
showed Doug the constraints of his own rural landscape, the siren’s  
365 song of freedom—of landholding, independence, and self-  
sufficiency—still obtained. “Since I am able to live in the country I  
am able to do almost anything without bothering anyone around  
me,” he wrote. “I am able to ride ATVs and hunt when hunting  
season comes” (Taylor “[Response Paper #1](#)” 2–3). As we would  
370 explore in Janisse Ray’s *The Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999),  
no human being is an island. Rather, as Doug came to realize, “The  
only constraint . . . is too much freedom” (Taylor 3)—and that what  
seems to be freedom to some is, to someone else, a devastated landscape,  
a sullied watershed, toxic homelands, and a fractured community.

375 *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood by Janisse Ray*

Our second primary text returned us to a geography more fam-  
iliar to most of our students: Author-activist Ray’s *Ecology of a Cracker  
380 Childhood* is part memoir, part ecological treatise, of the devastation  
wrought by Euroamerican exploitation of the longleaf pine ecosys-  
tems of the southeastern United States, specifically focused on her  
Baxley, Georgia, hometown. Ray’s childhood environmental con-  
sciousness was shaped not only by her rural Southern upbringing,  
but by being raised in the cluttered isolation of her evangelical  
385 family’s commercial junkyard. Even as a child, Ray understood that  
this landscape marked her and her siblings as different in undesirable  
ways. “We knew nobody else lived the way we did, but we didn’t

390 know how they lived," Ray writes. "We knew they were wasteful and  
threw perfectly good things in the garbage, which ended up at our  
house. We thought that meant they were better than we were" (29).

395 The students loved Ray's honest, heartfelt book, which spoke to  
their own rural working class experiences. Their passion for Ray's  
text, and their growing comfort with discussing more complicated  
understandings of "environment" and "place," resulted in some of  
our liveliest class discussions, jumpstarted by Scott and Jane's  
increasingly vigorous intellectual parries.

400 "You notice that he didn't *kill* the snake, he just left it and walked  
away," Jane said one day in class, shortly after we had begun reading  
Ray. "So he had obviously made some kind of peace with the natural  
world; he'd developed some compassion for it, maybe after all of the  
violence he'd already inflicted." She was pleased with her thoughtful  
interpretation. Gathered around a picnic table near our classroom,  
under tall pines and a sunny early fall sky, we were discussing the  
scene in which Ray describes her paternal grandfather being called  
405 by his adult son, Ray's father, to see the huge snake he had discovered  
behind his father's refrigerator:

Daddy said the snake, coiled up, would fill a hubcap.  
410 "If you butchered him out you could eat for three  
months," he said. It was dim behind the refrigerator,  
with the electricity already turned off in the house, and  
he couldn't tell what kind of snake it was. It looked like  
a rattlesnake.

415 Grandpa peered around, kind of grunted, said "I  
reckon it is," and ambled back into the front room with  
no more concern than a mailbox. (59)

But Scott disagreed with Jane's interpretation that the Ray patriarch  
could feel any kind of peace with the natural world. "Not a chance,"  
420 he said.

"Why not?" Jane asked.

425 "The way I see it, that's the grandfather's way of demonstrating  
his power," Scott replied. "His power over women, his power over  
his son, who doesn't really hunt or fish; his way of allying himself as  
the end-all, be-all predator. He's someone who's obviously comfortable  
with being threatened, because he can threaten right back. He  
doesn't give a damn what anybody thinks. He doesn't kill the snake  
because it's a way of reinscribing his power over his environment: of  
not killing when he could, of leaving a deadly snake in a space where  
it might hurt his family members. It's sort of a middle finger to  
430 society."

"What!" Jane said, shocked. "No way!"

The students started laughing.

Jane put down her book. "No, seriously," she said, "he could easily have killed the snake, but he chose to let it live. I really think Ray is trying to point out that despite this man's consistent violence toward other people *and* toward the environment, he still has great affection for the natural world. People are complicated! I mean, look on page . . . oh, where's the part where she describes what her grandfather is like?"

The students flipped through Ray's "Iron John" chapter until Sunshine said, "Page forty? Where she's talking about him being violent?"

"Yeah, there! Thanks, Sunshine. And—oh! OK, up even a little farther, the part about the woods. . . ." Jane read: "Because he withdrew often to the woods for safety and comfort and for shelter and food, he knew them like nobody I've ever known. All his life he never loved a human the way he cherished woods; he never gave his heart so fully as to those peaceful wildland refuges that accepted without question any and all of their kind" (40).

"Yeah, but—" Scott began.

"No wait, just one more part, the one Sunshine pointed out," Jane said. "She goes on to describe how violent he is with humans, that he was 'terrifying, prone to violence and unmerited punishment that caught you unawares'" (40).

"And that her dad never wanted to get caught alone with him when he was a kid," Lynsey added.

"Yes, exactly!"

"But that just supports *my* point," Scott exclaimed. "That he'll brutalize anyone or anything at will!"

"Yes, but because he *doesn't* choose to kill the snake here," Jane argued, "doesn't that demonstrate that even this brutal man has a warm spot in him for the creatures of the natural world?"

"Yes!" said Tamara.

"No!" said Grey.

The students started laughing.

And so we continued, this kind of dynamic lit-crit we both loved, modeling to students a number of important ideas about the value of close reading and the possibilities of creative, well founded, expansive literary analysis. Why did this debate over not killing a rattlesnake matter? Pedagogically, it mattered because students were fixated for almost an entire class period on the details of Ray's text and how those details made meaning. They saw that interpretations—ways of seeing the world, literally and

475 figuratively—mattered, and they hurried to plumb the text for evidence to support or refute the position of the professor or classmate they agreed with, or to promote their own different interpretation.

480 In building these interpretations of the text, students were simultaneously, if unknowingly, developing critical interpretive and communicative skills that would provide real-world currency in environmental movements—especially as they began to see that their ecoliteracies, their knowledges of their homelands forged in uniquely  
485 raced, classed, sexed, and gendered contexts, might compel new kinds of green coalitions. These discussions (and their reading of supplemental essays by Lawrence Buell, Winona LaDuke, and Vandana Shiva) forced students to transgress cultural and political boundaries to make connections that would help them make sense of, and deepen a sense of responsibility for, their own local environments in relation to global ecosystems, from understanding the environmental  
490 impacts of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to comprehending one’s hometown of Fairmont, North Carolina, as an equally significant ecosystem.

Our discussions of the text segued into our in-person visit from Ray, two weeks before Barack Obama’s historic election. Ray had  
495 been busy helping to register voters in her community, work that put her in contact with community stories of hardship and privation. “Everywhere I look the world is wounded,” Ray told our class, ticking off examples of racism, poverty, skyrocketing gasoline prices, and the Iraq War. The stories Ray told were compounded by the environmental devastation that Appling County, where Baxley is  
500 located, continues to suffer, a devastation of natural and human communities that drives many residents from the county. Doug queried her on her difficult relationship to her father, which she outlines in her text, and Brooklyn-born Tamara commiserated with Ray on the eternally fierce call of home, even a home that seems to outsiders to be damaged and broken. Our relationship to our home places can be  
505 mixed, Ray concurred, a compulsion to flee against the inescapable sense of the place that is hardwired within our bodies, and the loyalty to our families who remain in those places. Too often, Ray believes, we give ours best selves, our best years, to somewhere other than our home communities.

Ray’s personal warmth and generosity caused our students to fall in love with her. Most had never had a published author speak with  
515 them personally in a class, especially one whose life experiences paralleled their own. “I believe place matters to us, as people,” she told us. “My bones are made from south Georgia. If we all abandon these

places we're from, it spells doom for those places—cultural doom, ecological doom.” Both in class and later that day at a public lecture, Ray encouraged us all “to knock on people’s doors, talk to our neighbors, join our community gardens, with the full understanding that we will not share a common environmental consciousness, only fragments of convergence, but these are stepping stones toward conversation and revision and action.”

Whispering in Shadows by Jeannette Armstrong

Our third primary text illustrated well the forms of environmental activism Ray had outlined, that individuals might employ locally and globally. While Indigenous literatures in general remain vastly understudied and minimally taught in mainstream university environmental literature courses in the United States, *Whispering in Shadows*, by Syilx (Okanagan) community activist and author Jeannette C. Armstrong, rarely appears in U.S. higher-ed curricula even in American Indian literature courses. It was essential that Indigenous worldviews toward what Westerners term “the environment”—not some alien, disembodied context, as Westerners see it, but a total experience Native peoples view as an ongoing interaction with their relatives in the plant, animal, mineral, and element worlds—figure prominently in our course. Our strategy in selecting Armstrong’s novel reinforced multiple themes that we had already discussed, and introduced re-thinking some of these same themes from alternative perspectives.

By positioning *Whispering in Shadows* as the final primary text of our course rather than placing it at the beginning, we sought to work against mainstream determinist notions of Indians as original inhabitants of a pristine environment (often called “wilderness”) who gradually disappear into the mists of history with the advent of colonial contact. Armstrong’s novel depicts an active, vital twenty-first-century Okanagan community whose members engage in a range of activities on their home reserve, in urban spaces, and throughout the so-called Americas. These Natives have simultaneously maintained ancestral traditions and connections to the original teachings of their people even as many have internalized aspects of colonization’s legacy that result in community dysfunctions, including substance abuse and abandoning traditional foodways for the convenience of a fast food diet. In other words, Armstrong’s characters are real human beings who illustrate a range of perspectives on negotiating pre-colonial Syilx traditional practices and contemporary experiences in maintaining balanced relationships with the earth.

560 While Armstrong's novel outlines traditional practices of respect-  
ful reciprocity in Okanagan interactions with the natural world, her  
story also focuses heavily on the violent disruptions that the imperial  
project has inflicted upon the earth and its Indigenous inhabitants.  
565 Armstrong juxtaposes Penny's memories of loving, collaborative  
engagement with the natural world, through the Okanagan language  
(which, like all Indigenous languages, has developed in relation to  
specific homelands) and activities such as harvesting berries and  
camas with Penny's female relatives, against grisly scenes of the  
570 effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement, military occu-  
pation of Indigenous homelands in Mexico, and Penny's toxic wage-  
labor experience picking apples in the Okanagan (a job later linked to  
Penny's developing cancer). Armstrong's Indigenous depiction of  
humans' complex relationship with the natural world demands  
575 non-Indigenous consideration of "the environment" as a fabric of  
inextricably interwoven systems that are not outside of human  
beings, but that are *embodied* by humans, a concept our class first con-  
sidered while reading Petry's *The Street*. If environments are not  
respected and nurtured, the health and respect of human bodies and  
communities cannot be expected to endure.

580 Yet Armstrong's novel expands the concept of human body as  
"environment" from one of individuality to that of collectivity. "I've  
been thinking about us, the human, as 'natural environment,' too,"  
Penny writes in a letter to her non-Native college friend, Julie. "Aren't  
585 we? I don't mean as individuals. I mean the body human. How is the  
human organism, as one whole unit, faring in what it has wrought?"  
Penny observes to Julie the number of "[h]ealing workshops spring-  
ing up everywhere," workshops focusing on human and environ-  
mental healing, and tells Julie that she heard one American woman  
590 "[speak] about being wounded by technology" (84). By interlacing  
Penny's diary entries, personal letters, interior monologues, poetry,  
Coyote stories, memories, and activities, the structure of Armstrong's  
novel creates a unified fabric encouraging a holistic view of global  
environments, which include human beings, to counterbalance  
595 the fragmentation created by neocolonialism's environmental  
devastation.

The powerful notion of environmental stewardship that emerges  
from personal responsibility based on the rights of all members of  
the natural world—from stones, to water, to turtles, to wind—was  
another radical concept to the majority of our students. Armstrong's  
600 text represents an Indigenous worldview toward homelands and  
other natural spaces that insists upon their healthy maintenance *for  
their own sake*, rather than for how these environments can serve

humans as resources. To help our students contextualize this concept, we assigned several of Armstrong's nonfiction essays: "Let Us Begin with Courage," "Sharing One Skin," and "En'owkin: Decision-making as if Sustainability Mattered." In these essays, Armstrong more explicitly articulates a number of Okanagan beliefs about community process and how it arises from the original instructions embedded in Okanagan language and lands. Responding to "Sharing One Skin," Sunshine wrote:

Armstrong consistently says that she, and her people, [are] nothing without the Land. . . . But it is not just any area of land found in a city block or city park, rather from the land in which her ancestors are from, a land shared by those within her community. It is through the interconnectedness of the individual + family + community + land that this life saving formula is found. "I fear this because I know that without my land and my people I am not alive. I am flesh waiting to die." ("Sharing One Skin"). . . .

[I]t is easy to see why Penny, the main character of her novel, emerges [as a] Native environmentalist (Costanzo, "Response Paper #5," 1-2)

Doug also found a powerful message in Armstrong's novel, one that complicated his assertion earlier in the course that "[t]he only constraint [in nature] is that there is too much freedom" (Taylor, "Response Paper #1," 3). Indigenous worldviews toward the natural world do not focus on the concept of "freedom," but on longstanding beliefs in respectful relationships that foster ecological, cultural, and spiritual sustainability. "Armstrong made everything clear by explaining how her tribe deals with environmental problems and their beliefs," Doug wrote in his final response paper: "I really believe this concept mainly because we as individuals make decisions that can affect every aspect of life. For example, if we as a society continue to pollute the environment then we will also continue [to] aid global warming and destroy the ozone layer. If we do that then we, basically, will be living on an island surrounded by water because of the ice caps melting" (Taylor, "Response Paper #5," 1-2). Doug's ice caps metaphor recognizes the sort of "no person is an island" environmental and social justice theme that, in myriad forms throughout the semester, we hoped our students would consider more deeply. As we approached the semester's end, we also strove to create culminating assignments that would allow students to reflect on their enhanced environmental understandings, and take these understanding with

them as they interact with family, friends, home places, and international spaces. Such encompassing awarenesses of the meshwork of systems that create healthy biodiversity are at the heart of global Indigenous worldviews.

Underscoring the dynamic interconnections of all peoples and environments, and proving that individuals can change the world, Dollie Burwell, the founder of the U.S. environmental justice movement, visited Pembroke in early November and inspired our class with her story of Warren County, North Carolina's fight against a PCB dump. After a private company illegally disposed of the chemical alongside nearly two hundred miles of roads across North Carolina, the state chose predominantly poor, predominantly African American Warren County as its dumping ground—despite the site's environmental unsuitability. "The state thought we didn't know PCBs from Dr. Pepper," Burwell told our class. But the African American, American Indian, and white residents of Warren County joined together and showed the state otherwise in fall 1982. "Local community members should make decisions about their community environment," Burwell said, as the incipient environmental justice movement showed the urgency of interracial cooperation and the immorality of outsourcing toxicity and pollution to less powerful communities.

As images of children wearing gas masks, marchers carrying signs and shaking their fists at state highway patrolmen, and protesters laying their bodies on the asphalt to stop the PCB-laden dump trucks flashed on the screen behind her, Burwell emphasized that you have to fight for the world you will hand over to your children and grandchildren. Though the Warren County protesters did not stop the dump, they did extract from the state the promise to clean the site, a promise kept in 2004. "You have to let people see there was life on that site," Burwell said, thankful that deer and wild turkey have returned. As someone who also was a critical force behind President Obama's southeastern campaign, Burwell continued to demonstrate the power of individual activism. She emphasized that it's up to each one of us to make the change we want to see. "The movement is not hard to start," she said. "If you stand up and have passion for what you believe in, people will follow" (fig. 1).

Q2, Q3

### Harvesting a Legacy: Sustaining Our Engagement

Although we relished our activities inside and outside class, we never wanted the understandings provoked by the course to remain merely academic exercises for our students. Instead, the subject





Fig. 1: Students Tamara White-Chambers, left, and Sunshine Mardella Costanzo, right, were pleased to meet environmental justice founder Dollie Q2, Q4 Burwell, center. (Photograph by Jane Haladay.)

demanded that we work to bring our knowledge to the wider world and to learn as much from living experts as we had from texts and films. From a panel four of our students led at the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's annual convention, to a collection of environmental oral histories, to multimedia presentations about local flora and fauna, our activities and assignments sought to empower our students to engage: to engage not only with texts, each other, and us, but with environmental and social justice advocates, our campus neighbors, and our regional—increasingly global—communities.

AASHE's 2008 conference, held in Raleigh, NC, gave four of our students—Jennie, Desirée, Grey, and Tamara—the chance to engage higher education's visions of environmental justice, as well as to connect with other faculty and student activists. Moved by Vandana Shiva's keynote address exposing the irrevocable global interconnections of transnational agribusiness and intrigued by the dozens of green products and services available to campuses, our students nonetheless had the feeling of being outsiders at this event. Unlike other student participants, they weren't at AASHE because they were a part of an environmentalist group; Desirée and Tamara realized that they were two of very few participants of color. Yet the standing-room-only turnout for our students' panel, and the

735 questions they fielded after their papers, showed them that their self-perceived “difference”—and the differences in the way they engaged environmentalism and sustainability—was the very knowledge sought by many of the conventioners who lacked the UNCP students’ experiences. After their presentation, several members of the audience came up to thank them for sharing their stories. Some audience members invited them to join regional eco-advocacy groups with global engagements, such as the Southeast Youth Food Activism Summit and Real Food Challenge; an Americorps Volunteer in Service to America stationed at Berea College recommended bell hooks’s newest book, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2008). And Michael B. Smith, assistant professor of history at Ithaca College, commended the four students “for addressing the social justice dimension of sustainability in a way few other panels or speakers [at AASHE] did” (fig. 2).

740 The students’ midterm assignment invited them to engage their home communities and families on issues of ecoliteracy through the collection of environmental oral histories. Talking with their relatives, neighbors, even friends from their dorm, gave all of us new



770 Fig. 2: Students Jennie Harris, White-Chambers, and Grey Sweeney, from left, prepare for their presentations at the 2008 conference of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education at the Raleigh, Q4 NC, convention center, as Professor Scott Hicks listens (right). (Photograph by Jane Haladay.)

775 understandings of local ecoliteracies and deeper appreciations of the  
importance of environmentally and socially just ways of living with  
other people in a shared place. Doug's father, born and raised in  
Robeson County, reminisced about "play[ing] in the woods. I guess  
780 you don't do that these days, but we had some vines from trees and  
we would swing from tree to tree playing Tarzan." Taylor went on to  
lament the end of spring and fall, thanks to now-frequent  
90-plus-degree days in March and September, and called on people  
to be more careful: "We maybe already have done too much, and I  
don't know if we can turn it around or not."

785 Students' environmental oral histories evidence the curiosity and  
respect the majority of the students brought to the assignment. We  
were happy that students' oral histories created an archive that shed  
new light on literary, political, and international cultural frameworks  
and theories we studied in class; we were happier still to witness the  
790 students' renewed appreciation for and engagement with the regional  
landscapes we inhabit and the people who are stewards of these  
environments.

As the semester drew to a close, we understood the importance of  
fortifying ourselves by acknowledging our shared community of  
795 comrades and supporters, so that we might continue to engage these  
crucial issues together once the class was over. Thus our final assign-  
ment was a celebration, a potluck "community feast" instead of a  
final exam, held in the university's Multicultural Center. Students  
invited their environmental oral history interviewees to attend, and  
800 we were honored to welcome Addison's grandmother, who treated  
us to a homemade pecan pie. While we filled our stomachs with  
Robeson County field peas, chicken and rice, and even kudzu  
(Lynsey's treat), students gave presentations on local flora and fauna.  
With their presentations over, we traded recipes and ideas about the  
805 changes we wanted the university cafeteria to make and what we  
each could do to stop global warming. Our feast, we soon saw, was  
both culmination and initiation.

In the end, we are proud of our students, our class, what we left  
behind, and the optimism we have for the future. To mark the con-  
810 clusion of our course, we planted a pin oak tree one gray December  
day during finals week; our tree thrives outside Scott's office window.  
We are happy to hear that UNCP's nascent recycling program is  
making major progress, diverting about seven tons from landfills in  
April 2009 alone ("Campus recycling" 10). The same month, two  
815 years after we began planning this course, we won final approval for  
a permanent General Education course, ENG 2410, titled  
"Environmental Literature." While a minority of sciences faculty

wanted to protect their turf from humanities faculty when the discussion of an interdisciplinary environmental literature course arose, we appreciated the support of biology professor Lisa Kelly. She wrote that she was “excited that students in the humanities will be challenged to investigate environmental issues, and the value of ecosystems and species to literature, culture, and history” and added that she would encourage students to enroll in the course (fig. 3).

As we reflect on what we and our students taught each other, we feel honored that we participated in an act of environmental thoughtfulness on our campus that we hope continues to multiply. We hoped to offer students the tools and knowledge to become “ecoliterate”—empowered with “comprehension of ecology, human ecology, and the concepts of sustainability, as well as the wherewithal to solve problems” (Orr)—in a world where environmental threats demand new consciousness and urgent action. While it isn’t possible to assess the long-term effects of our course on changes in our students’ thinking and behaviors concerning environmental and social justice, their



Fig. 3: Student J. J. Welch, left, and Hicks, right, shovel dirt on the tree our class planted as a semester’s-end commemoration. Professor Jane Haladay, Q4 center, welcomes faculty, staff, and students to the ceremony. (Photograph by Jane Haladay.)

end-of-course evaluations suggest that they will not view “the environment” and personal relationships to place the way they did before they enrolled in AISS/ENGS 2111. We residents must reclaim southeastern North Carolina from agribusiness and landfills. We must work to recuperate traditional knowledges and ecological heritages. And we must value all community members and the environmental memories they safeguard and share. Put another way, we must find and put into everyday action an environmentally just way of speaking of, with, and for nature. Our class, we hope, was a small but meaningful step down that road, whether asphalt or red earth.

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