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The Place of Drawing in Place Journaling

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Trained in American environmental literature, I typically teach one to three interdisciplinary courses a year built in some way around this subject, with special attention to the rich American traditions of literary nature writing and environmental activism. Most often I teach *Nature's Nation*, focusing primarily on literature, and *Eco-Freaks*, centered on activism (the title is offered tongue-in-cheek to suggest how activists tend to be seen by the mainstream). Beyond teaching about the key figures, movements, and milestones in the American experience of nature, I hope to inspire in students a desire to know more about our local biome, located in the southern foothills of the Ozarks; to give them ways to sharpen their powers of perception; and to encourage them to explore the relationship between knowledge and value, i.e., between ecology and ethics. In addition to the traditional readings, formal paper, and final exam, I include one more assignment in my seminars, to be pursued throughout the semester: students must select a specific place on campus that they will visit at least once every week for at least thirty minutes at a time, about which they will compile a "place journal." I recommend using a simple, lightweight notebook, into which blank, letter-sized paper can be manually inserted. The entries comprising this journal are each composed of two parts: a page or so of original writing (by hand, preferably) and a page or so of original, handmade drawings.

Our campus is blessed with a fifteen-acre nature preserve featuring a mix of southern bottomland woods and remnant prairie; most students choose a section of it for this assignment, though they are free to choose any corner of campus they wish as long as it is outdoors. As one would expect, the students write about what they see, hear, smell, touch, and perhaps even taste during each visit. At the top of each entry they record the date; the time of day; the ambient temperature; the degree of cloud cover; and the direction and strength of the wind, if there is any. Although I acknowledge aloud, when introducing the assignment, the temptation students will surely feel to get some of these data off the web—after all, many of them carry smart phones—I urge them to set aside this crutch as best they can over the semester; being able to gauge accurately and unassisted the temperature, wind velocity, and other conditions is part of the sharpened powers of perception that I mean for them to gain from the course.

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The rest of the written portion of each entry should record, describe, and reflect upon whatever the student observes during her weekly encounters, with particular attention to the slow changes wrought by the unfolding season, whatever that may be. Typically students struggle with the early efforts until their vocabulary improves along with their powers of perception. Predictably, students discover a direct relationship between these skills, for we often do not truly see or hear something for which we have no name or no descriptive words. To help students identify their local tree, flower, bird, insect, and mammal species (beyond generic terms like “bug”), I lend out field guides such as the Audubon Society’s guide to North American birds. A student who goes from saying “bird” to “starling” or “towhee” within a few weeks is already a more attentive, more *placed* student than she was at the start of the course; she is often a more self-confident one as well insofar as she is more at home in her world, more acquainted with her (nonhuman) neighbors. I also make available to the class a copy of *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*, a compendium of hundreds of terms for specific features of North American landscapes, terms that are in danger of being lost for lack of use as more and more of us spend our lives surrounded by walls, concrete, and glass. For example, in our part of the country, close to the Arkansas River, it is helpful to know the difference between a meander scar and an oxbow lake, both of which are explained in *Home Ground* (226, 255).

The drawing is a much less common requirement than writing for place journals assigned in humanities courses. Honors students at the University of Central Arkansas are accustomed to writing a great deal. During their recruiting interview, they learn that writing will be a central focus during their four years in our program, which is a stand-alone curriculum comprising twenty-seven credits of interdisciplinary seminars culminating in a senior thesis. They are not at all accustomed to drawing, however, and many are insecure about their skill, perhaps rightly so. Although the occasional art major does turn up in honors, we more frequently have students majoring in fields like philosophy, pre-med, English, sociology, and political science. Few of them have had instruction in drawing, so I make clear from the start that their sketches will not be evaluated for artistic merit and that the point of this exercise is learning to see, concentrate, and attend to details beyond what everyday language encourages or allows.

I do not send students out unprepared. Just as I offer aids in developing a vocabulary for what they will encounter outdoors, I also give them a few tools of the drawing trade. First I invite a drawing teacher from UCA’s art department to one of our earliest class periods. Using the classroom whiteboard along with a few props (a basic drawing pencil, an artist’s eraser, and a homemade viewfinder cut out of card stock), he reviews a handful of useful techniques for capturing in two dimensions what the students will typically see outside in three. After he has taken questions and elaborated as necessary on his lesson, I provide the class with a few pages from the second chapter of Clare Walker

Leslie's *The Art of Field Sketching*. This chapter reinforces and illustrates the techniques reviewed in class, such as contour line drawing, gesture sketching, and diagrammatic drawing as well as the different results that can be achieved by using the pencil and eraser in various ways. Finally, I provide the class with an example, a "journal entry" of my own devising (see Appendix).

More than once over the course of a semester, I offer reassurance that the students' drawing skills will not be evaluated. I care primarily about good-faith attempts to get to know their specially chosen places. The written portions of their entries need not be polished prose, but, like the sketches, their writing should evince, over time, improved observational skills. As wildlife illustrator Roger Tory Peterson says in his foreword to Leslie's book, "There is no better way to open your eyes to the natural world than to go afield with a sketchpad or notebook. You go beyond mere identification naming things [*sic*]; you begin to understand shape, function, movement, and behavior" (xiii). Such understanding is rudimentary to an ecological turn of mind, which, arguably, more of us need to cultivate in today's world.

Student reaction to the place journal assignment has been mostly quite positive. They often begin by grumbling a little, especially when the weather is uninviting, and some of them do not initially see much point in the exercise (the environmental science majors are a welcome exception), but by the end of the semester I find on course evaluations that most of the students are astonished to realize how much they have learned about their immediate surroundings and how much they had previously neglected or indifferently taken for granted. What had been undifferentiated screens of green (in the warm seasons) or brown (in the cold ones) have now become unique places with distinguishable features.

Drawing complements our ability to name, describe, and reflect on things. Taken together, writing—"naming" in the broadest sense of the word—and drawing can prepare students to develop a personal interest in nature's oxymoronic "ordinary wonders" and in their well-being. This insight is one facet of the relationship between knowledge and value, ecology and ethics, that I ask students to consider carefully as the semester unfolds. At the very least, this relationship bears on students' understanding of the passion that motivates the writers and activists they are studying in my courses, many of whom have fought tirelessly and sometimes sacrificed much on behalf of the more-than-human world. I do not expect that students in my honors seminars will become tomorrow's nature writers or environmental activists. But given that they will be tomorrow's caretakers of the world we share with plants and animals, I would like them to become citizens who are thoughtful about this charge. To become, in other words, people who can see.

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APPENDIX

EXAMPLE OF JOURNAL ENTRY GIVEN TO CLASS

January 20, 2011
 ~12:45 pm 55°F

Clear, bright sky
 Wind ~5 mph (?), from
 southwest

One of those beautiful winter days when it actually feels nice to be outside, in the sunny parts anyway. I guess this is the southern version of a January thaw, because ordinarily it's colder than this at this time of year. Today I'm going to concentrate on the biggest, most obvious feature of my spot, a largish tree with serious-looking thorns all up & down the trunk & along many (all?) of its limbs. The thorns make it easier to look up in a book than many trees (especially at this time of year when there are no leaves on them), so I'm going to say this is a honey locust, Gleditsia triacanthos. I guess the common name comes from the tree's attraction to bees, because according to Dr. Dwight M. Moore's Trees of Arkansas, it's "a good producer of nectar" (93). He calls the leaves "bipinnately compound," meaning there's one long stalk with lots of leaflets up & down it, kind of like this in his picture:



What I see on the ground to day are just millions of these little guys, about 1/2" to 1" long. Pale brown, almost a dull copper color.

This tree has gray-brown bark with ridges going up + down it, looking sort of like there's a gray skin being stretched too tight around a darker layer underneath, so that the "skin" pulls apart in places + leaves little gash-like openings. Maybe it really is a kind of shedding that's going on - the outer bark being stretched apart by the growing tree, creating patches that will eventually break away. I don't see any little scraps of bark on the ground nearby, though, so for now my theory is unconfirmed.



The thorns up close are (like this:
(on the tree limbs, that is...))

On the trunk, for some reason the thorns appear in clusters:



a little bump shows up on the stem just below each spike - is this where the tree buds in spring?



Overall shape of this tree - lower branches droop down

Very dangerous! The ones near eye-level are particularly scary.

Each thorn is quite hard + stiff, though somewhat bendable. Dark brown, smooth, shiny.

These thorns raise a puzzling question: whatever are they for? Usually such things are produced by evolution for the organism's protection from predators, for example the quills of a porcupine. Or they can be modified leaves, which I think is the case with spiny cacti, intended to reduce water loss in dry climates. We get some very hot, dry weather here, but not as much as you find west of the Rockies, & besides, I think the heavy locust range includes much of the eastern U.S. So I'm not yet sure what to make of these particular daggers ... something to investigate further.

