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## Swamps, Flat Earthers, and Boughs of Holly: “Encountering” the Natural World and the Poetics of Environmental Literacy

Wendy Ryden

I will not start off with the litany: the ravages of climate and other anthropogenic *damage* (not *change*, see Freeman) to the environment that beset all living (indeed nonliving, too) things on this planet and beyond. Where would I begin, and where would I end? If you don't know the science about melting glaciers, species extinctions, and plastic chowder, you can readily find it. If you do know it, then chances are you understand what's it like to be me: waking up every day with a broken heart.

Our environmental crisis seems to be a perfect example of Oedipus's dilemma: knowing brings no profit to the wise. And yet many of us continue to do what we can: reduce our carbon footprint; try to educate where/when we can; agitate for the political change necessary to produce policies that are efficacious, just, “humane”; save an animal; plant a tree (or don't cut one down); have the courage to ask the neighbor not to use Round Up. Perhaps we do these things for no other reason than they are the right thing to do in the face of the inexorable. Still, many of us do nothing, or not enough, even if our sympathies lie with the planet and not the greedy oligarchs and klepto/plutocrats intent on destroying it. We are unable to de-normalize our routines, disrupt our ontological orientations, to properly account for what we intellectually understand to be a crisis of epic proportions. Sometimes it is just too hard; we cut corners; we forget; we put it out of our minds. Take selfies; photograph our dinners and bring the leftovers home in styrofoam and plastic bags.

I speak for myself: even as I, too, try to set aside my despair and live in accordance with the ways of other humans; even as I, too, give into exhaustion and denial, what makes the crisis real for me is what I believe to be my authentic connection to nonhuman beings and the natural world. This makes me a romantic, I think. That's OK. I do not see nature as the enemy of civilization, as the mythologies of some ancient (preindustrial) peoples seem to suggest. I do not fear being preyed on by lions (I don't live in a village close to where they roam) or being engulfed by forests or look at pristine lands and see opportunities for resource exploitation and development. Often, I see a wasteland, littered with plastic debris and strangling invasive vines, monoculture flora that supports little wildlife and is kept alive by polluting machines and chemicals. The crisis doesn't need to be made real for me. It is the neighborhood I live in. I am already swallowed whole by its abject ugliness and the human activity that supports the debacle. And yet within the tragedy are the sustaining moments of beauty: the bees buzzing on the asters in late autumn; the birds feeding on the flowers' seed in winter; the much maligned and needlessly feared opossum that comes to the compost pile; the sassafras that has found its way into my yard past the chopped-down, paved-over sub/urban disaster of my Long Island habitat; the rare moments when it is quiet enough to hear bird song and cicadas; looking a wren in the eye who waits a second before taking flight.

During one of the recent election cycles, I received a flier in the mail, one that epitomized the crude racism of dog whistle politics. One side depicted tattooed thugs from

MS 13; the other a suburban Long Island neighborhood complete with vulnerable white woman (no visible tattoos). I was meant to be horrified by the tattooed men and vote with the white woman talking to the strong white male leader, but liberal snowflake that I am, I found the scene of horror to be the suburban lawn depicted on the flier's "safe" side. Terrified by the sterile lawn, I wondered how anyone could find such a landscape sustaining, let alone safe. To me it is both a symptom and an embodiment of the psychosis, the necrophilia that has taken hold. A testament to the eye of the beholder. That we might see a staged image of tattooed men as the epitome of danger but be oblivious to the desolate ubiquity of the manicured suburban lawn—that is what I call a literacy crisis, and one that I ask teachers and scholars in the arts and humanities to address—for both themselves, their students, and their institutions.

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Of the many skin-crawling political slogans and tweets with which we have been inundated, “drain the swamp,” the one some might see as the least egregious, brings home for me the antiprogressivism of the era with its outdated metaphor of environmental ineptitude that nonetheless contains our collective folk wisdom, or lack thereof. It is not incidental; language matters. (How many swamps were drained, I wonder, to make golf courses around the globe?) In the latter part of the twentieth century, we seemed to understand the importance of wetlands, a triumph of education and activism, as we passed legislation to protect them and enforced those laws. Now amid the zeitgeist of deregulation, of course it makes sense that the ill-advised metaphor resurfaces with a vengeance. As I write, “the wall” threatens to break out of its comic symbolic domain into an actual incarnation of lost wages, squandered tax dollars, and ecological devastation to an environmentally sensitive southern border. Language matters because it tells us something about how we think; who we are.

We live among climate deniers and flat earthers (many of whom take solace and pleasure in racism and xenophobia). Environmental *ill*iteracy is at the heart of our present crises and constitutes what Henry Giroux has called “weaponized” ignorance: “a malicious ignorance forged in the arrogance of refusing to think hard about an issue.” Perhaps, as some suggest, we who are in the know need to craft more careful messages, more efficaciously manipulative arguments, that can circumvent protective reflexes of ignorance, by appealing to what’s at stake for humans—and their children—in an apocalyptic future. Perhaps. But my educator’s instincts incline me in a different direction, one that decenters that chauvinistic human subject towards a more liberating notion of the mindful, relational human.

In the beginning of the winter season, my native holly was covered with gorgeous red berries. I noticed the other day that not a single one is left. The quiet frisson of excitement I felt at the discovery is a nearly indescribable gift to me as I wonder about the critters (I strongly suspect the mockingbird as one) who feasted and left scat. My world opens up. The ecologist Stephen Harding speaks of the phenomenon of “encountering” nature and nonhumans:

“Encountering” means really meeting something that goes beyond one’s intellectual process.... “Encounter” is when that conceptual structure vanishes. And you actually meet the being as the being coming forth from itself as itself revealing itself to you in a way that is beyond your intellect in a way that is much more deeply intuitive and much harder to express. In fact, scientific language is inappropriate for this kind of encounter. It’s poetry that does it. It’s a poetic encounter.

Harding goes on to describe his experiences of empathetic encountering with muntjac deer that led him to profound connection with the earth itself. From a moment of encounter with one of the deer, he “could understand the wholeness of the muntjac and how they relate to the entire wood.... And it went further than that” where he “could also get a sense of the ecology of the whole forest,” and then if he were “very lucky that wholeness would spread out,” and he “would get a sense of the ecology of the entire earth.” This “poetic” moment sounds similar to what Mary Oliver describes in the first two stanzas of “Moths”:

There's a kind of white moth, I don't know  
what kind, that glimmers  
by mid-May  
in the forest, just  
as the pink mocassin flowers  
are rising.

If you notice anything,  
it leads you to notice  
more  
and more.

My encounter is not just with the unseen beings nourished with the fruit of the holly. It is with them, but also with the holly tree as it grows and changes. It is with the entirety of my modest backyard and the refuge it is able to provide, and beyond, and yet the encounter is contained/engendered in the particular moment/space/ drama of the disappearing drupes. My relation to all these things is indeed poetic and life-changing in its quietness, and its persuasive power far different from a fear-mongering, albeit accurate, diatribe about imminent destruction. My encounter places me in a relationship of sustaining care with other beings.

When I teach world literature during a fall semester, I save *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the end, and I bring in a branch of holly, that indispensable prop carried by the Green Knight so relevant to the seasonal meaning of the poem: "... a bough of bright holly/That grows most greenly when bare are the groves" (72). Granted I am cheating a bit by showing students an American specimen, but I began the practice of taking the cutting to class a few years back, when I realized that some of my students did not know what holly was. I discovered that I should not take this environmental literacy for granted, but it becomes my privilege to share with them this pleasure of the holly.

Literacy, as we know, is not something we master but an ongoing project. Environmental ill/literacy is very democratic: we all can and need to learn more. I learned recently, to my gratification, that great horned owls nest during the winter months. I wondered that I didn't know this beautiful thing but was nonetheless glad to find out. During a sustainability meeting on campus, I was surprised to discover that many of my colleagues present did not even know what a horse shoe crab is, let alone the marvel or crisis of it and its importance, especially given that we are located on Long Island. ("You mean those little things you buy at souvenir shops in South Carolina?" someone asked, referring, I guess, to the unlucky hermit crabs.) More ominously, another colleague, well-versed in social justice issues and a committed advocate for equality, announced to me his intention to treat his lawn with chemicals to achieve the aesthetic of wasteful monoculture. It was clear to me that facts would not "educate" him, by which I mean persuade him to choose a different lens through which he might consider his decision. So what would?

To assert that such individual choices might be inconsequential in scale compared to systemic commercial and corporate pollution and other global atrocities is, I believe, quite right and at the same time at least somewhat to miss the point. Encountering is as much a form of self-care as it is a form of caring for others, an ethical way of being in

the world, another root/route of mindfulness and presence. The concept of encountering in Harding's sense might provide a foundation for environmental literacy as alternative (or at least addition) to the coopted rhetorics of ecologies and sustainability that have become yet another layer in our vast expanse of academes.

Perhaps the possibilities of encountering are more catholic than at first glance. A former student tells me that reading George Orwell's description of the dying elephant in our creative nonfiction class some years back (not a class steeped in environmental literacy) sparked in her a commitment to conservation of the species. Probably not what Orwell imagined, although who knows. She tells me she tries every day to improve her efforts to care for our world. A bit of balm for my broken heart—temporary, fleeting, but I take it.

Encountering is a basis for being, not a teleological solution for what ails us. It cannot make hard choices for us (deforest hardwood to make room for solar panels; cultivate nuclear power instead of fossil fuel; when/whether/how to harvest other living things). But in order to make such decisions (and compromises), we must bring our best, most aware, ethical, relational selves to bear on the questions. An environmental literacy that sees this as our objective might be worth creating, even as we contend with losses that can't be recovered; with futures that are inevitably dim.

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