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Blue Tang, 2018
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CANDACE CALSOYAS

Environmental Literature as Stylistic Montage

Blending science
and imagination

All literature to a lesser or greater extent is environmental. That's the conclusion I've come to after having taught environmental literature for more than two decades. After all, any literature must be situated in an environment, whether it's earth, sky, the universe, or the tiniest microbial cell. But if all literature is environmental, what specifically distinguishes environmental literature as a genre? And what is its value? Is it just preaching to the choir?

In August 2018, Lori Cuthbert and Douglas Main wrote for *National Geographic*, "A Pacific Northwest orca likely bonded closely with her calf before it died, which could help explain her record-breaking emotional sojourn." Even as other members of the pod took turns carrying the calf, the mother gave every indication of grieving for more than a week. Meanwhile scientists followed the funeral procession. What is she doing, they wondered, protecting a dead calf, one of the very few born this year?

As I ponder the meaning and value of environmental literature, I wonder how scientists evaluate the whale's mourning, a human emotion to which we all relate. How can emotion be explained scientifically? Unique to our era is a special blending of science and art, science and poetry, objectivity and subjectivity. A stylistic montage characterizes environmental literature, which both informs and

engages the creative spirit. Never before has such a unique blending occurred, whose purpose is to describe and illuminate the natural.

The Nature Essay

In teaching environmental literature, it is almost an imperative to start with the nature essay, an age-old genre in which poets and writers search for the meaning in nature's beauty and meaning. Poets in ancient times wrote meaningfully about the natural world. The Roman poet Horace, for example, wrote in the first century BCE:

How happy is his low degree,
How rich in humble poverty, is he,
Who leads a quiet country life;
Discharged of business, void of strife.

The whole world in this time was essentially countryside, its population about three times that of California today, yet poets wrote lovingly about the bucolic, which comprises an early part of the literary canon.

Almost two millennia later, Henry David Thoreau made solitude and simple living fashionable in his 1854 book *Walden*.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life.

Getting to the heart of life, discovering what makes nature tick, has been an intensely romantic pursuit; living the simple life, undistracted by human artifice, is somehow synonymous with finding the essence of existence. The nature essay has been the expression of those seeking communion and transcendence and as such, it is an important part of environmental literature.

Additionally, early nature writing often reflects environmental concerns. George Catlin, better known as a painter, wrote in 1841 about the loss of North American Indian culture. His essays decry the slaughter of buffalo, which Indians traded for whiskey. "Many are the rudenesses and