KATHLEEN GALLIGAN

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

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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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

wilds in Nature's works, which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man." Even during this time, environmental writing was engaged, an act of protest, as he feared the destruction the white man perpetrated.

The Shift in Environmental Writing

Beyond nature writing, which is often rhapsodic, pastoral, and romantic, what is environmental literature and how is the genre distinguished? The French journalist André Maurel, author of several books about Italy, wrote about the Roman countryside in 1916:

> There are no monuments, no notable ruins; only the mountains, the rocks, and the lakes. It is to be a day of rest. The body may feel some fatigue, but the mind, overloaded with marvels of art, will have an opportunity to balance its burden with the refreshing marvels of nature. . . . Her character is in the *ensemble*.

His view is aesthetic and human centric, focusing on the ensemble as if it is a suite of furniture in a living room. Nature's beauty may be in its ensemble, but it is also the minuscule details that enable the system of the natural world to exist. The romantic view emphasizes the visual, not necessarily the functional.

Contemporary writer Richard Fortey, in his book *The Wood for the Trees*, uses similar language, referring to the natural world as an "assemblage." But his writing is better informed by science—knowledge of biology, geology, ecology—and so it represents a different form of nature writing.

> The sum of all my observations will lead to an understanding of biodiversity—the variety of animals, plants and fungi that share this small wood. . . . Almost every habitat has its own rich assemblage of organisms competing, collaborating and connected. . . . For me the poetry of the wood derives from close examination as much as from synthesis and sensibility.

The Blend of Science and Poetry

Tracing the timeline of environmental writing, writers like Fortey have merged the poetics of nature writing with observations grounded in and informed by the sciences. In the 1960s, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, an indictment of the pesticide industry, was written in a style that appealed to a mass audience. Unusual for a scientific work, Carson began *Silent Spring* with a fable describing an American town in which all is harmonious but becomes blighted. The "grim specter" that creeps over the town destroys biological systems of animals and people, eventually producing a silent spring in which there is no birdsong. Though a fable and an exaggeration, much of what Carson introduces is corroborated later in the book. Indeed, dying birds on the East Coast motivated her to write.

Appealing to a much wider audience, environmental writing has taken this dramatic turn, in part due to urgency of environmental crises, which no longer are just the concern of scientists but of necessity are the concern of all humans on this planet. Carson pleaded to stop indiscriminate spraying of food crops with pesticides that poison people and nonhuman species. Her writing provoked an intense scrutiny of corporate disregard for the environment and resulted in political action to pass the Clean Air and Water Acts in the 1960s and 70s, along with the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency. Carson shook the world with her accusations against humans' poisoning of the planet, and many writers, following Carson's example, have used environmental writing as protest.

Some writers, rethinking the natural world, have explored animism. Again, like Carson, they have blended science and imagination in order to engage readers in broadening understanding of the nonhuman world. In "Thinking Like a Mountain," an essay in his *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold, an American naturalist, wrote in 1949 of an animistic world in which rocks, plants, and mountains have a beingness all their own. He invited readers to think like a mountain that has witnessed the world much longer than any human. He wrote, "Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of a wolf." Wolves, he said, trim deer populations, which protects the mountain ranges from being overgrazed. The cowman, on the other hand, kills wolves to protect his herd and does not "think like a mountain." Overgrazing creates displacement of soils and dust bowls with "rivers washing the future into the sea."

Humans now realize that we are only a small part of the picture and writers now employ a montage of styles informed by both science and poetry, a mélange of cultural expression in which nature is understood and described in varied ways. In the modern era, environmental writing often speaks for the threatened, the displaced, and the disenfranchised. Ecology, the examination of the interconnectedness of biotic systems, gives voice to that which cannot speak for itself. A University of Southern California law professor, Christopher Stone, author of the seminal "Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects," has argued that courts should grant legal standing to guardians to represent the rights of nature, much the same way that infants are represented by their guardians. Such environmental advocacy plays a key role as we question nature as something to be dominated versus something to steward. So, we are in an age of correction, rethinking how we can restore the planet rather than just exploit it.

Additionally, we are in a time of correction in determining the relationships between science and art, science and poetry, objectivity and subjectivity. Marine biologist Eva Saulitis studied whales in the Pacific Northwest and published an article in *Catamaran Literary Reader* with the compelling title "Listening and Seeing with All That I Am: On Being a Scientist-Poet." She wrote:

> Science in its pure form—the quest to understand the world—is, to me, a beautiful thing. . . . But isolated from other ways of knowing, it shows its limitations, and in the margins of what science allows one to say or think, I sought, and still seek, a more encompassing language and vision with which to express what I witness in the natural world: an ecological poetic, a poetic ecological.

She pointed out that scientists as observers are collectors just as poets are.

> We think of the scientist as detached, impassive. . . . In the field, at the computer, the scientist adopts the persona of the objective observer. Is she that much different from the poet who adopts the mind-set of the scientist to collect the most accurate data possible?

We are living a precious moment in which science and art overlap. The romance of the nature essay is now accompanied by scientific observations and truths. When I was a Fulbright scholar in Bhutan, the country of quiet mysticism and gross national happiness, I lectured to ministers of education, health, and commerce. When I asked them to write their definitions of *nature*, they thought at length, embracing this task as though unfolding a divine truth, which they did! When they shared their definitions, they were startlingly similar: *nature is everything and everything is connected*. I was dumbfounded by their answers as I realized that few American politicians would ever come up with such an ecological concept.

We now know how interconnected all living systems are and I wonder, will we end like the pathetic whale, carrying around a dead planet? Meanwhile, we can do our best to observe, think, and write about our world, both poetically and scientifically. That's the value of environmental literature.

Candace Calsoyas has a long history teaching environmental subjects at University of California, Santa Cruz. As a Fulbright Scholar, she has taught environmental literature in Albania, Bhutan, and Greece. Calsoyas was a founding member of California Certified Organic Farmers and has maintained a wildlife-habitat Christmas tree farm for thirty-five years in the Corralitos area of the Santa Cruz Mountains.