Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice
Issue 46.2 (2025)
Special Issue: Gender and Climate Justice
Research

Uncertainty and Other Forms of Hope: An Environmental Pedagogy

by Tanis MacDonald

Abstract: It's axiomatic to declare that an environmental pedagogy, especially for women, queer folks, BIPOC people, assault survivors, and anyone who identifies as disabled or vulnerable, is vital to making space for ourselves geographically and psychologically in our workplaces and neighbourhoods. It is equally necessary politically at this stage of late capitalism where the spiked club of use-value is wielded to commodify everything, including our experiences of nature. Trust, risk, and the precarious present have been drawn sharply into pedagogical focus in recent years, exacerbated in the classroom and elsewhere by students' anxieties about the future that manifest as a withdrawal from the uncertainties of the present moment, including—but not exclusive to—climate anxiety. This article's examination of living in that shifting "now," in classroom discussions and in writing assignments, considers the important entanglement of uncertainty and experience as they inform, or even form, hope.

Keywords: climate change; creative writing; environmental pedagogy; future; hope; nature writing; place; uncertainty

Résumé : Il va de soi qu'une pédagogie axée sur l'environnement, en particulier pour les femmes, les personnes queers, les personnes autochtones, noires et de couleur (PANDC), les victimes d'agressions, ainsi que toutes les personnes qui s'identifient comme handicapées ou vulnérables, est essentielle pour nous permettre de nous approprier l'espace physique et psychologique dans nos milieux de travail et quartiers. Elle est tout aussi nécessaire sur le plan politique, à ce stade du capitalisme tardif, où le gourdin à pointes de la valeur d'usage est brandi pour tout transformer en marchandise, y compris nos expériences de la nature. Ces dernières années, la confiance, le risque et l'instabilité du présent sont devenus des sujets pédagogiques centraux, exacerbés en classe et ailleurs par les inquiétudes des élèves face à l'avenir, les poussant à se replier sur eux-mêmes face aux incertitudes du moment présent, dont l'anxiété climatique. Cet article explore la façon de vivre dans ce « présent » changeant, que ce soit dans les discussions en classe ou dans les rédactions, en mettant en lumière l'importance du lien entre incertitudes et expérience, qui éclairent voire forgent l'espoir.

Mots clés : changements climatiques; écriture créative; pédagogie axée sur l'environnement; avenir; espoir; écrits sur la nature; lieu; incertitudeTBA

Author: Tanis MacDonald is Professor of Canadian Literature and Creative Writing in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, located on the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe peoples. She is the author of The *Daughter's Way: Canadian Women's Elegies*, *Straggle: Adventures in Walking While Female*, and six other books. She is the General Editor of the Laurier Poetry Series, and winner of the 2025 Open Seasons Award for creative nonfiction.

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

With cloud for shift
how will I hide?
May Swenson, "Question"

I love this poem by May Swenson, which begins with the line "Body my house" and ends with the lines above and such vulnerability. I still read it as a queer love poem and as a love poem for the self but, increasingly, I have been thinking about it as an unintentional environmental poem. How can a body—anybody's body—do the hot work of hope? What if we can't hide? Trust, risk, and the precarious present have been drawn sharply into pedagogical focus in recent years, exacerbated by students' anxieties about the future that manifest as a withdrawal from the uncertainties of the present moment, including—but not exclusive to—climate anxiety. This article's examination of living in that shifting "now," in classroom discussions and in writing assignments, can be thought of in the same breath as Swenson's question: "How will it be" to be here, and be here in hope? There are no easy answers and yet everything about teaching people from the ages of 18–25 depends on this fierce and delicate inquiry.

*

To begin in practice, come with me to a humid August day in 2023, when I led a writer's walk for the second annual Fertile Fest in Toronto, a poetry festival organized by the wonderful writer, performer, and bookseller Kirby. I titled the event "The Truth about Bodies in Motion" and in the late morning, Kirby and I test-walked the route together, passing through the verdant Alex Wilson Community Garden in downtown Toronto, then plotting a route along several blocks of Graffiti Alley and back to the Garden. My goal for the walk was to suggest to the assembled writers that presence and rest would be emphasized as much as observation with optional—very optional—writing prompts. I had just read Tricia Hersey's *Rest is Resistance* (2022) and on the strength of Hersey's discussion of the power of dreaming, I suggested to the group who assembled that it was great to get inspired on a walk, but it may be just as important *not* to write, to let the slow pace and the sensual stimuli assist them in resting their thoughts. Hersey notes that resting in public is radical—for women in particular, and for women of colour especially. It shows that we dare to *not* do, that we are resisting the push to constant productivity. I'll add my own observation to Hersey's: often women and gender-fluid folks busy ourselves in public because appearing to rest makes us vulnerable. If we are reading or scrolling or taking pictures or making notes, we are less likely to attract unwanted attention, to be targeted.

As I spoke about these ideas, a few of the younger writers were taking notes and a few of the older writers looked a bit tight-lipped. Where were the writing exercises?

The garden was lush and the alley's art was vibrant. On our return to the Community Garden, I caught myself leaning too much on sight, partly from habit and partly because of the temptation supplied by the spectacular oranges and blues of the alley art. In the Garden, I closed my eyes and reached into the filament-like leaves of an asparagus fern. This fern was abundant in one of the garden plots and, as it touched my fingers and the backs of my hands, I compared the sensation to—what? Falling water? Gecko feet? The longer I stood in downtown Toronto with my eyes closed, the more I was flouting safety concerns. Even as I tried to honour the feel of the plant's fine wisps on the skin of my hands and wrists, I remembered the men who had been drinking in the park but left (or had they?) when my group of women and queer folks drifted in. I stubbornly kept my eyes closed and let the fern tickle me. When I opened my eyes, a young queer person was standing next to me, looking at another plant. Wanting to share the tactile gift of the asparagus plant, I said to them, "Hey, close your eyes" and, when they did, I guided their hands to the

asparagus fern. The two of us stood quietly as they felt the fern's strange prickle, its green hairiness, and its almost reptilian texture. After a minute, they opened their eyes and said, "When you said *close your eyes*, I had no idea what you were going to do." I hadn't thought of that, even though their comment mirrored what I had been thinking just a few minutes before: was it safe to close our eyes in a place that could be dangerous? But they trusted me and I was grateful to be trusted, grateful that they made themselves vulnerable just because I asked and that I could share the asparagus fern with them.

It's axiomatic to declare that an environmental pedagogy, especially for women, queer folks, BIPOC people, assault survivors, and anyone who identifies as disabled or vulnerable, is vital to making space for ourselves geographically and psychologically in our workplaces and neighbourhoods. It is equally necessary politically at this stage of late capitalism where the spiked club of use-value is wielded to commodify everything, including our experiences of nature.

As with the Fertile Fest walk, my classrooms are full of young cis women and gender-fluid people, BIPOC students and disabled students, people for whom the occupation of space is always highly negotiated, wild and semi-wild spaces even more so. I can't help but think of what the poet and community worker Leanne Charette, who uses a wheelchair, said at the launch of the "Moving on Land" issue of *The Goose* during the conference for the Association of Literature for Environment and Culture in Canada in June 2024: "Even when I think I don't want nature, nature wants me." Charette articulated something I've been considering as I set writing assignments in both academic and creative writing courses, assignments in which I ask the students to enter into the nearly impossible act of being here.

Entangled Disengagement: The Work of Being Here

Being here is hard work. I try it every day and succeed only intermittently.

Additionally, consciousness in public is painful for a wide variety of historical and contemporary reasons. For example, Tricia Hersey is clear that her work in *Rest is Resistance* is rooted in Black liberation theology. If non-Black people wish to work with her ideas, they must first acknowledge and think deeply about the role of white supremacy in denying Black people life-sustaining rest and the space to dream. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* offers another look at a resonant historical consciousness—and its societal erasure—that are everyday experiences for Black people:

> Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased. (Sharpe 2016, 15)

Something similar, but different, could be said of Indigenous experience: the act of being fully conscious on stolen land in a country that has sanctioned violence against Indigenous bodies for centuries is no easy prospect and never free of biopolitical concerns.

These concerns, and many others, appear in the classroom as part of students' daily struggles. My students' faces show the effort it takes to engage with other people, to respond to the environment around them, to show up mentally and emotionally, to give attention to the books we are reading and the ideas we are discussing, and to lavish their attention on their own words on a page or words they speak in class. For many students, disengagement does not have the flavour of rebellion, that blend of defiance or refusal or judgement that is so familiar to me as a GenXer. They are disengaged not because a university class is irrelevant but because nothing at all seems real or important or graspable, concrete, malleable, achievable, real. They are disinclined to believe in the present. They are, in Scott Hamilton's terms, deeply involved with "ontological insecurity": uncertain in their ability or, indeed, the necessity to be here (Hamilton 2017, 279).

Hamilton parses the concept of entanglement in the Anthropocene—that is, that humans are inevitably entangled with beings and systems—to challenge the desired outcome of an entanglement that puts human beings at the forefront. Noting that human survival has long been thought to be the primary goal, Hamilton suggests something quite different. In his formulation, the human *refusal* to entangle is the true marker of the Anthropocene: "A profound separation or *dis*-entanglement of humanity from nature…replaces what was once the primary and objective concern of security—i.e., survival, or avoiding death—with *anthropos*, the human being, as a new geological and spatiotemporal force to be problematized and secured in both the present and the future" (Hamilton 2017, 579). Published in 2017, Hamilton's article seems prescient about the kinds of separations that were about to explode into public life: the division between right-wing and leftist politics globally; the rise in misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia; and the isolation of COVID-19 restrictions, including the schism between those who could afford to isolate and those who could not, minimum-wage and service workers and the underhoused, especially. Further, while Hamilton notes the movement from prioritizing survival as the primary concern of security to the need to secure a future, he gestures to something arresting: "With the catastrophic prognoses for the Anthropocene's future making humanity's temporal, ontological, and epistemological essence uncertain, a paradox forms: an existential discontinuity, in which humanity must secure itself in the future *from* itself in the present" (Hamilton 2017, 280). Instead of securing ourselves from nature and its un/controllable forces, Hamilton identifies the challenge of the Anthropocene as "securing ourselves *from* ourselves" (emphasis in original).

Bleak as this may seem, Hamilton's paradox describes—eerily—what I've been seeing in the classroom: students who act out their uncertainty by uncoupling acts from aims, presence from learning, and sometimes, most disturbingly, the present from the future. In securing a future for themselves, some students devalue their present. They are not here. They are in the future. "Here" is an inconvenience that will soon be over. I can practically hear them thinking, "Good riddance."

From my perspective, this is not about the erosion of ability. Ableness and willingness meet somewhere in every students' (and every prof's!) mish-mash of family obligations, anxieties, achievements, hopes, encounters with rules and regulations, encounters with other people, and the professor's sometimes-distracted eye on how and why performance in a course at a particular time works well for some students and less well for others. With the advent of remote teaching, "here" didn't always mean a designated physical space. With the return to in-person teaching and with the advent of Generative AI, students' disbelief in the necessity of being "here" has grown. They understand fully that completing the course means a credit, means part of a degree, and may eventually mean a job. They want to secure the future for themselves but they are unconvinced that this will be accomplished by investing in the present. Hamilton's paradox proves true; they are divesting from the present in order to secure the future.

For students and allies setting up anti-war, anti-genocide, and pro-peace occupation camps on campus, this makes perfect sense. They are refusing the present in which universities and other corporations invest in war-making machinery and so they demand divestment from those blood-soaked practices in order to secure the future. But what of the student who shows up to class regularly but is consistently disengaged, staring out the window, scrolling on their phone, and not taking in any ideas, and then submits very weak material and—here's the important part—is thoroughly mystified by their lacklustre grade? Uncertainty in the necessity of the present would seem to kneecap the future rather than secure it.

But there's hope. My reading of Hamilton's paradox suggests a way to unlock the Escher-like tiles of this rickety Mobius strip of existential discontinuity in which we preserve ourselves in the future by protecting ourselves from the present. Just as it's hard to be engaged and fully present all the time, it's equally hard to remain disengaged 24/7. That's the pain I see on student's faces: fear of being drawn in, to committing to something, to letting in the world, despite their dedication to the idea that nothing matters. They wonder if being here will be painful and if the pain will be worth it. These are good matters about which to wonder; I often wonder about them myself.

I appreciate Sarah Jaquette Ray's discussion of her "failed experiment" in imagining the future, as she describes early in *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety*, in part because I had a similar experience in asking students to think about the

past. Ray asks her students to do an exercise in which they would have a chance to visualize their ultimate climate-changed future and then identify the changes that they could break down into doable steps. Ray thought the exercise would, like Hersey's dreaming, be "empowering…free[ing] them from the immobilization we all feel in the face of a problem as enormous and intractable as climate change. But it bombed…. When I asked them about their ideal future state, I heard crickets" (Ray 2020, 2). My experience was similar. Following Rebecca Solnit's example in her foreword to the 2016 edition of *Hope in The Dark*, I asked students to name, as Solnit did, recent historical examples of things that had changed for the better. Solnit listed, among other things, the Civil Rights movement, the defeat of a violent regime in East Timor, and marriage equality. Since few of Solnit's examples were Canadian, I asked my students to list some changes they had witnessed in Canada. Again, crickets.

This was in no way the students' fault but rather a beam in my own eye. Young people who were in high school and the first years of university during COVID restrictions, young people who had been children when President 45 began loudly spewing hate speech, were unpracticed in finding positive change. They were, some told me, protected from bad news by their parents who wished to allow them to be kids instead of small prematurely-worried adults. We think of hope as a youthful predisposition, but I'm not so sure that's true. Older people find hope in seeing the way constant flux can favour change for the better. Small wonder then that my students were attempting to negotiate themselves into the future without setting foot in the present. Ray is right when she notes that nothing would happen—climate-improvement wise or pedagogically—without concerted attempts on the behalf of instructors to introduce students to a "politics of desire" and ways of "politicizing your angst" (Ray 2020, 7). And to do this, we all need to practice being on our "own interior terrain" (Ray 2020, 14).

Here: Making Place, Making Hope?

The emphasis on knowing one's own interior terrain is an old idea made urgent in our times. The craving not to be present is as potent in its own way as the craving to be present. This is a problem older than Thoreau's injunction in *Walden* to "simplify, simplify" and to choose to "live deliberately" but let's begin there. Thoreau was in his late twenties during his years at Walden Pond; his beloved brother John had died when Thoreau himself was twenty-four. As a young and grieving man, he wanted to relearn presence and humanity through semi-isolation, and to remember his deceased brother in part by slowing down his daily existence via living in a hunter's hut by Walden Pond in the back of the Thoreaus' family property. Thoreau's youth makes him more like my students than myself but, just as his simplification meant more presence, their simplification manifests as less presence, even disembodiment: to be in their bodies less, to disbelieve in the significance of attention as learning, in time as a concentration of moments, and in place as a potential personal signifier. These are all constructs which the transcendentalist Thoreau manifestly pursued.

Students can get anxious or even angry at the notion of attachment. Many years ago, I taught a student who yelped, as though his back was against the wall, "You can't make me write about my feelings!" He was right: I could not. Nor did I particularly want him to. All I could do was assure him that writing about one's feelings was not the assignment, even in (or to be perfectly frank, especially in) a course in creative writing. That student, now long graduated with a doctorate, may also have been saying *You can't make me act like anything matters*. *You can't make me like things*. *You can't make me present*.

Like my reply to my "no-feelings" student, I have to acknowledge that I indeed can't make anyone do any of those things. But unlike my reply to that first student, I now say to students in more recent courses, "In this case, being present—or making a genuine attempt to be—is going to be part of the actual assignment."

In their textbook *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*, editors Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz describe an "essay of place" that emphasizes landscape as a character and in which "the writer's presence is felt, showing readers what is special" (2014, 275). Perl and Schwartz have chosen their sample essays well, demonstrating that an essay of place could take a variety of perspectives: discovering a new place, asserting a cultural importance of a place,

or feeling alienated from a place. But even with the good examples, I knew my students would need assistance. This pedagogical task—the need to urge a thoughtful process between impulse and final product—is the hot ground on which I walk. I often employ textbooks in class to assure students that I am not "making things up," that this is a real pursuit about which others have written. And *then* I make things up. That is to say, I take an idea from the book and enhance it, specifying for my students' needs. In short, I am constantly MacGyvering assignments to assure the students that I see them, including their gender and class identities and their struggles to articulate their realities. Putting a twist on standard assignments keeps me on my toes, too. We think together through the terms of the assignment and discovery is very much the point for all parties. So it was as I designed an assignment for the students to practice the skill of "being here" in a way that is personal and specific but also has a connection to creating presence on the page.

The essay of place assigned in *Writing True* begins with the writer's admonition to notice, to put oneself in a place and unpack the importance of a place via the five senses. It's clear to me that Perl and Schwartz want the significance of the place to grow from detail and then to grow larger than that. For me, via Perl and Schwartz, a big part of the assignment is daring to let yourself describe not only a place but some definition of *your* place, and muse productively about beauty and meaning and history and belonging or lack thereof as they relate to that writer's definition of place. So far, so doable.

But damn it, for me, it was a little *too* doable, too easy for students to slip from beneath the assignment's good intentions and muse about how soothing "nature" was and so commit themselves to saying almost nothing: a classic "here-but-not-here" strategy. I can hardly blame them; corporatism, capitalism, and colonialism conspire to imply that all places look the same, or if they don't then they are not worth looking at, travelling to, or paying attention to their inhabitants. Intellectually, students know that isn't true but it's hard to swim upstream against a tide of assurances that their screens—and only their screens—will show them every place worth being in. As for me, teaching essays of place has become impossible without invoking habitat loss, the manic speed of urban development, human migrations, and climate ontology: that weather is a place. I couldn't tell students to write about place without invoking Rob Nixon's "slow violence" of displacement that "refers to the loss of the land and resources" that affects Indigenous students, migrant students who have left war and poverty in their home countries, and students from farming families (Nixon 2011, 4).

Returning to my students' concerns as filtered through Hamilton's concept of securing one's future self from one's present self, what did that mean when gender identity and ability identity were added to the mix? I think of Donna Haraway (1991) shuttling between the cyborg manifesto as feminist work and her more recent research on species intercommunication as rooted in, as shaking loose from, machine-human-animal triangulation. I wonder about Robin Wall Kimmerer's description of her student who "becomes one with her inner muskrat,"plunging into a marsh to gather cattails in the "Sitting in a Circle" chapter of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013, 287). I wonder about Cheryl Strayed's disquieting encounter with rapey trail walkers in *Wild* (2012) and the recent social media controversy over whether a woman in the woods felt more comfortable encountering a strange man or a bear. (And because I'm a Canadian literature specialist, I think of Marian Engel's 1976 novel *Bear*.) Thinking through and with all these women—scientists and hippies and feminists and Indigenous mothers—brings me to a conclusion that sometimes the most feminist thing I can do is go for a walk and honour everyone I see on the way who is vulnerable. Our uncertainty is our present and there is every reason to believe it will be our future.

Gendered Uncertainty and Other Forms of Hope

Back in the classroom, I saw a fight brewing about presence: presence as a value, as a methodology, and as something beyond toxic optimism of insisting the students "love nature." Some students were suspicious that I was trying to force appreciation on them, so I spoke with them about a climate change spin on Berlant's "cruel optimism" in which they would stand in the very space that they wanted to save with no hope of saving it or Berlant's further term "stupid optimism" (which I think they wanted to ascribe to me), a disbelief that the situation is dire, that all one needs to do is work within the system to find joy. That was not the goal, I assured them. They might feel those feelings—or

not—but I was more interested in the role of a sensation (part intellectual, part affective) that nearly all of them were experiencing: uncertainty. Far from being something that the future cannot abide, uncertainty is the substance of the future. As Timothy Morton puts it in "Beginning after the End," his introduction to *Dark Ecology*: "The future is unthinkable yet here we are, thinking it…. Art is thought from the future. Thought we cannot explicitly think at present. Thought we may not think or speak at all" (Morton 2016, 2).

To walk in semi-wild spaces, you have to be open to the element of surprise, to encounters with birds and animals and plant life that you haven't anticipated. To strangenesses and a lack of understanding. Those are encounters with beauty and sometimes death or woundedness, sometimes shock or fear, sometimes desperation. But all of that is connection. Risking engagement means both liking and not liking things: the drunk men and the asparagus fern. You also have to choose to like some things enough so that you will notice when they are no longer there because of the season, because of climate change, because of entropic decay and death. Violence towards our genders has long made us uncertain in both urban and wild spaces, and I am well aware of the irony inherent in asking students to engage with "thought we cannot explicitly think at present" á la Morton. Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, suggests something similar, that "hope is not a door, but the sense that there might be a door at some point, some way out of the problems of the present moment even before that way is found and followed" (Solnit 2016, 22). As many wrinkled brows as there were in the classroom, others brightened at the notion of uncertainty as the cusp of knowledge.

What if our present-future paradox is our strength? "Security," forever a gendered issue, is at the core of these questions and its very definition – the feeling and provable reality that one is safe – has long been nigh unto impossible for historically oppressed members of the population. Who among us expects complete safety, a world wherein we are in charge all the time? This is different from craving or even working for such a thing. I well remember women's rights advocate and author Julie S. Lalonde noting in an online workshop on bystander intervention that she led in the spring of 2023 for the anti-harrassment organization Right to Be, "I know a world without sexual harassment is possible because my brother currently lives in it." Lalonde's point is hopeful in some of the ways that Solnit suggests but when I think about sending my students out to experience public space, I have to acknowledge that "security" in the Anthropocene has never been in the equation for the vulnerable and that security is something that only some people can afford. The rest of us have been figuring our way through the eminently dangerous world all along. Isn't the art of thinking the future in the grasp of every non-white, non-cis, or female person who reads of terrible times to come and thinks, "Hhmmmph, more of the same"?

On the Fertile Fest walk, I had delivered a blunt enough directive—"Hey, close your eyes"—but it still gave my walking companion some choice. They could ask why; they could say no and walk away; they could laugh and divert the comment; they could pretend I was talking to someone else. They and I were already engaged together in a dynamic of uncertainty, one in which I led them on a route, urged rest, did not demand productivity, and perhaps most importantly, demonstrated my own practice by doing all these things myself. They and I had solidarity as physically vulnerable people in a potentially hostile and dangerous atmosphere. They and I were in a comfort zone created by a group of like-minded people scattered around us. We were in a queer-positive feminist space, created by our host Kirby, the location and history of the Alex Wilson Community Garden as a space built to honour the legacy of a gay man who was a writer and a gardener, and the other walkers. All of that added up to some kind of temporary safety with the other walker's own trust and their generosity in extending that trust to me. How, then, could I support the students in being generous with themselves? In thinking towards the potential power of uncertainty?

With some of this in mind, I asked my students to choose a place, one that they are currently in or had been to recently, that they might think of a "homeplace" that could be well-researched, richly re-imagined, and rendered in a personal essay that unpacked the meanings, dimensions, pleasures, problems, and/or politics of "place." What is it to be here? I noted on the assignment sheet: "'Here' can be either the ground upon which you stand right now, or your homeplace as you define it, but it should be a definite geographical place, richly imagined and rendered. 'History' is your lived experience of a place with an emphasis on your (and possibly your family's) place in the political and cultural histories of the place you choose." Students could begin with a description of land: its shapes, flora and fauna, buildings, roads, parks, forests, suburbs, etc. In other words, they could include any information accessible via a walk

through the place and then enriched by research. If students wished to "re-visit" a past—or geographically distant—homeplace, they could get there virtually via films or videos, archival photos, cooking and eating cultural foods, etc. They could start with a family story (the older, the better) or begin with a locally famous event. They could work in opposition, correcting false assumptions about their homeplace or pinpointing discomforts brought on by the homeplace. I asked them to consolidate some of the affective aspects by digging into the ripples of history, especially the histories of people who shaped the place: Indigenous people; settler folks; waves of migrancy, industry, farming, urban planning, local fauna as impacts on a place.

My admittedly over-prepared worksheets notwithstanding, some students hesitated, asking questions that were thinly-veiled negotiations about the assignment. Could they write about a place they had never been? (Nope.) Could they write about Narnia or Hogwarts or Middle Earth, worlds that they argued they knew the best? (No, no, and no). With each question, it became clear that I had pressed my finger on a bruise that I didn't know existed. Everyone, including me, was taken aback by the pain.

The more they talked, the more I could see that their feelings of disconnection from place were not so much resistance as they were mystification. What did I really mean by "here"? What was the "right" here, the one I wanted them to experience? How could they do that? How could they protect themselves from the threat of being present? That's a good question: the act of detailed observation, of trying hard to be here, can be very painful, especially to those who have been told that they do not belong. But unlocking the ability to observe is a superpower. At the same time, I was asking them to do something that more than a few of them found offensive; I was asking for a sustained act of consciousness and uncertainty.

This has never been a perfect assignment; I still tinker with it. Some students wrote what they thought I wanted: a life-is-beautiful treatise. Others wrote about the history of a place without including themselves as inheritors of that history. While this very well could be a component of their relative youth, many struggled to define what was "allowed" to be space and story and what was not. What about places that are not considered places? Many students have been told by various authorities that their homeplaces are non-places, not important, not historical, not worth examining: a place that is not one.

But there have been some great moments too. One student wrote an essay about her hometown as shaped by a killing of a young woman ten years previously, and her own experience growing up female within the shifts and splits of living in that community. More than one Indigenous student wrote about the relief of returning to their communities after weeks of being at university. A student who had long thought he was of settler origin wrote about how the river he lived close to became a more complicated space for him once his father began discussing his Indigenous heritage. Another student wrote about growing up in a low-income housing complex in Markham and its unexpected pleasures.

As for whether or not we should be teaching hope in the classroom, we can only teach students to consider possibility and presence, and from there hope may emerge. As Ray notes, we must teach students (and ourselves) to be "good ancestors" to those who will follow us (Ray 2020, 14). She calls this developing the "muscle of radical imagination" (10), a phrase so apt I wish I wrote it myself. As Raymond Williams wrote decades ago in his far-seeing understanding of how working-class people resist dehumanization, "To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing" (Williams 1989, 75). We have a chance to discover history and connection and to defy the grimness of late-stage capitalism that strives to keep us unbalanced, disengaged, separated from our histories, our prides, our abilities, and from tapping into the joy of uncertainty as opposed to the fear of uncertainty.

May Swenson, thanks for the question.

Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Charette, Leanne. 2024. Panel discussion. Launch of "Moving On Land" issue of *The Goose*. Association of Literature of Environment and Culture in Canada conference, Waterloo, Ontario. 19 June.

Engel, Marian. *Bear*. 1976. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.

Hamilton, Scott. 2017. "Securing Ourselves *From* Ourselves? The Paradox of 'Entanglement' in the Anthropocene." *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 68: 579–595.

Haraway, Donna. 1991. Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge.

Hersey, Tricia. 2022. *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*. New York: Little, Brown.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants.* Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions.

LaLonde, Julie S. 2023. "Stand Up Canada: Bystander Intervention Training." Right to Be. Online workshop.

Morton, Timothy. 2016. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Perl, Sondra and Mimi Schwartz, eds. 2014. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction.* Boston: Wadsworth.

Ray, Sara Jaquette. 2020. *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Roman, Aja. 2018. "Hopepunk, the Latest Storytelling Trend, Is All About Weaponized Optimism." *Vox* 27.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2016. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Strayed, Cheryl. 2012. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. NY: Random House.

Swenson, May. 1994. "Question." *Nature: Poems Old and New*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Thoreau, Henry David. 1854. *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.

Williams, Raymond. 1989. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism*. London: Verso.

Appendix

EN369: Creative Writing: Nonfiction
Essay 1: Personal Essay on Place
Dr. T. MacDonald

From the syllabus: For this assignment, students will write a personal essay (see Chapter 8, Perl and Schwartz) about a place they know well (workplace, present or past home, neighbourhood, etc.) using a research component to illuminate the meaning, dimensions, pleasures, problems, and/or politics of "place."

More:
Consider the models we've been reading in class in which the authors consider place as a vital component in the personal essay, as in the examples that you have read in Perl and Schwartz's *Writing True*, and in Ariel Gordon's *Treed*. Your goal is to produce an essay of place that explores the practice of being in that place. As in the examples, it must be a definite geographical place, well-researched, richly re-imagined, and rendered.

For one example, Jericho Parms' "On Touching Ground" uses her grandparent's Texas ranch as a counterpoint to her study of art and movement, and her racial identity. Another example: Ariel Gordon's essays in *Treed* work with her local place (Winnipeg's urban forest) and also places far from her home (forested places in Banff and elsewhere).

With these models, consider the ripples of history and other aspects of place you could research. These might include research your lived experience of a place with an emphasis on your/ your family's place in it, and also histories of people who shaped the place: Indigenous people, settler folks, waves of people from global cultures, people working in industry, farming, etc. Consider too research into urban planning, local plants and animals, and historical events as they impact a local place.

A few suggestions about how to start:

5) Start with a description of the place: its flora and fauna, buildings, roads, parks, forests, suburbs, etc. If you are physically in the place, take a walk through it and see what's there.
6) If you are not physically in the place, find a way to get there virtually: YouTube, family photos, music of a time and place, etc.
7) Start with a family story: the older, the better.
8) Start with a locally famous event.
9) Work in opposition: "correct" false assumptions about that place.