DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 557	CS 216 040

AUTHOR	Valenti, Peter
TITLE	Through Nature to Class in the Classroom: Creating an Environmental Reader To Compose Cultural Identity.
PUB DATE	1997-03-12
NOTE	13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoenix, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Pluralism; *Environment; Higher Education; Instructional Development; *Instructional Innovation; *Social Class; Student Development; *Student Empowerment; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	Collaborative Writing; *Nature Writing

ABSTRACT

The project of writing and assembling the rhetoric-reader "Reading the Landscape: Writing a World" came from a wish to open for discussion a strong feeling that thinking about the land and a person's relationship to it empowers people as writers. The objective was to develop a composition course related to the environment that will address effectively the question of class. The accepted canon of American nature writing reflects a privileged, educated, mostly male, middle-class viewpoint. Much of the class difference is the invasion of borders, the moving from one world to another. A crucial link with class involves lower socio-economic class students with the highest dropout rates who fail for a variety of reasons, many of which involve problems of identity and self-esteem. Connecting with each other through the medium of writing is one way of building the bonds necessary to keep each other from failing. Thus, the text works as far as possible with collaborative writing and seeks to let each student find ways to explore his or her home/place/world. The final objective is to see how writing taken from previously unempowered writers who have negotiated the move across borders of class, race, and gender can speak to other people of all classes who are about to cross or are in the process of crossing similar borders. (CR)

****
*   Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made   *
*   from the original document.   *
****

ED 412 557

"Through Nature to Class in the Classroom: Creating an Environmental Reader to Compose Cultural Identity," 12 March 1997

(Section Title: "Nature Writing and the Nature of Writing in First-Year Composition," CCCC Convention, Phoenix, AZ)

Peter Valenti

This project of writing and assembling the rhetoric-reader Reading the Landscape: Writing a World came out of a wish to open for discussion my strong feeling that thinking about the land and your relation to it empowers people as writers. I've taught since 1975 at FSU, the most integrated campus of the UNC system. I think that nothing has been more satisfying for me as a teacher than to see students who, at the beginning of a semester could summon a couple of paragraphs only with great difficulty, but who by the 3/4 mark in the course are writing substantial essays with confidence. I attribute much of this improvement to their working out of their sense of their place in the world.

A basic conundrum of teaching "nature" and "the environment" in first-year composition is that, while the concerns these terms entitle are certainly the province of all people, they tend to be identified with select groups--notably well-off whites, mostly male. Probably the most substantial pre-1990s collection of American enrironmental and nature writing, Hal Borland's Our Natural World(1965), clearly demonstrates the white middle-class male-dominated canonical world to which a few female writers--Rachel Carson, Sally Carrighar--are admitted if they demonstrate

CS216040

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
P. Valenti

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

evidence of having undergone training in the scientific patriarchy. Among the factors that enter into this identification is the way "nature writing" as a genre has traditionally been constituted, with both its practitioners and its readers tending to be of European origins, the activities depicted and the activity of reading these depictions associated with the leisure class.

The question then becomes "How do we develop a composition course related to the environment that will address effectively the question of class?" I'll explain one possible way of achieving such an objective. And I'll try to do this without moving into the genre of the justifiably maligned infomercial. Basically, with Reading the Landscape I wanted to put together a book that would work in regular or standard composition courses as effectively as it would in single-theme instances. In order to make my points, I'll talk first a little bit about the idea of class, about the fit between class and the instruction of writing, and then use two authors--Annie Dillard and Gloria Anzaldua--as examples of how we might use such texts in tandem to open up new and more inviting landscapes for students to explore.

As Lynn Z. Bloom states in her recent CE article "FR Comp as a Middle-Class Enterprise," "Most of the time the middle-class orientation of freshman composition is for the better, as we would hope in a country where 85 percent of the people--all but the the super-rich and the very poor--identify themselves as middle-class." She tweaks this idea with the following: "Yet, to a lesser extent . . . middle-class standards may operate for the worse, particularly when middle-class teachers punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class" (655). In relating these ideas to writing instruction, Bloom goes on to say: "Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle class either in actuality or in aspiration--economic if not cultural" (656). So, now we see where all of us stand!

But does a statistic derived from the statements of individuals, which may resemble wishes more than actual conditions, tell the entire story? Thinking back to my own childhood as a first-generation Italian-American growing up in blue-collar western Mass, I imagine that my family and I would identify ourselves as middle class because we seemed to be in the middle: while we clearly didn't have the possessions or the lifestyles of the WASPS who lived on the hill, we didn't quite look like the people in Dorothea Lange's FSA photos, either. At the bottom of my street, Norman Street, ran the West Branch of the Westfield River, a mile or two from the point where it flowed into the Connecticut. While this spot was neither Twain's Hannibal nor Wordsworth's Grasmere, it was still a place where the important connections with a larger world could be constructed pretty much without regard to class.

Having said that, I realize, too, that other racial or ethnic groups within the same class will not share the same sentiments. In Jack Agueros' Halfway to Dick and Jane, class appears as a divider among racial, ethnic, and religious lines. In chronicling the disparity between the impossibly middle-class reading material provided Puerto Rican students in the NYC public school system, Agueros suggests some of the ways in which such an education shortchanged him. One of my students, however, a lady--who grew up, as she tells me, "dirt poor" on a hardscrabble Sampson County farm--felt offended by Agueros' observations on class. She said, "What does he have to complain about? Look at how hard his family worked to have a decent place to live. His family never went hungry, and the love in the family is clear. What does he expect from the world, anyway?" Such comments indicate the resiliency of those who we (in our middle-class teacher roles) feel have been brutalized by systems over which they have no control. Her identification with Agueros through class elements common to both their backgrounds leads her to conclude that the sense of deprivation, of being relegated to inferior status, is a less meaningful consideration than the experiences of home and family that a person acquires, regardless of place. The question is, then, how do we use this strong sense of a relationship between home place and self as a means of moving into larger arenas of power?

In a thirty-year process of becoming comfortable with fitting my own experience with what I have learned from teaching writing, one moment crystallized for me the relations between a sense of place, however humble, and one's voice as a writer. While teaching at West Point in 1991, I began to understand connections among my sense of landscape, class, and the writing process. Teaching The Grapes of Wrath, I happened upon a memoir of a person displaced by the construction of Cannonsville Reservoir in the Catskills. At that moment, I understood more fully the extent to which my students at FSU and West Point derived part of their identity from specific details and emotions tied directly to place. I then began the work culminating in Reading the Landscape.

As I first reviewed several hundred potential texts for Reading the Landscape and later looked at competing environmental comp readers, I gradually developed a strong sense of how class relates to canonicity. In attempting to grant less conventional texts equal footing with widely anthologized, traditional "nature" essays, I have been forced constantly to confront issues of the canon. In short, I am convinced that the accepted canon of American nature writing reflects a privileged, educated, middle-class viewpoint. This is of course no surprise in regard to the canon in general, but I think we tend to feel that our "environmental focus" or interest in preserving the wild somehow sets us above less enlightened folks who would preserve Eurocentric views. Yet looking at collections of nature or environmental writing shows just as circumscribed a group of writers as Norton anthologies of the sixties. And composition readers with an environmental focus are even more guilty, for there the formal essay holds even greater primacy. Anzaldua's hybrid form of English/Spanish/Aztlan, for example, doesn't fit into such neat patterns.

Even though he finally didn't make it into the book, one writer has helped me to see how place defines one's sense of class and writerly identity. Charles W. Chesnutt not only set virtually all of his fiction in Fayetteville, but he created a racialized geography: Pull up Chesnutt's novel The House Behind the Cedars on the Internet and see how many dissertations use this novel in widely varying contexts. Often out of print since its initial publication in 1900, this novel speaks to the late 20th century with a voice not quite heard previously. Chesnutt's work functions as a productive paradigm of the complicating layers class and race lay over the landscape. The House Behind the Cedars operates against its Fayetteville setting to develop our sense of the subtle ways in which race and class determine the very place we inhabit, the very streets we walk upon. Though I understood Chesnutt's place on the American landscape only rudimentarily when I assembled Reading the Landscape, I now see how it serves as a model for composing ourselves over particular spots of ground.

Reading Chesnutt's work at FSU is particularly complex. He served as the first president of FSU, and our library bears his name. Though many of his descendants still reside here, he in effect moved and never returned. Yet he used "Patesville" as his main source of inspiration and material. Such distancing, physical as well as aesthetic, textures his work while it raises questions. How, for example, has the landscape changed in terms of class and race? When one examines the problems faced by the protagonist Warwick/Walden, what does one find today? How does movement across the landscape differ for us--and how do racial and class identities figure in the equation? In pursuing these questions, we have the opportunity to establish a landscape, across time, race, and class, that might serve as a model not just for literary studies, but more importantly for helping all students see how they might draw strength in their writing from their sense of where they came from. In working through such tentative ideas, I had great help from the evaluators of early drafts. For example, the first round of reviewers included two key comments. One reviewer suggested an on-target list of relevant texts, and said that I might even consider two from the "incomparable Annie Dillard." Another reviewer, commenting on the average age and ethnic identity of her students, noted that "my students would be more comfortable with Gloria Anzaldua than many of the authors you present." She then suggested that I look at Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, a text I did not know. After looking at it, I knew that I not only had to incorporate it in the text but that I had to adjust my sense of the world to accept this book, which I find truly "incomparable."

What happens to our notions of landscape when we juxtapose Anzaldua with Dillard, Thoreau with Miriam Davis Colt, Chesnutt with Burroughs? We may well end up with a classed geography as well as a racialized geography. Such distinctions are strikingly apparent in Steinbeck, who explores relations among humans, social class, and soil erosion, relations which were implicit in Cooper's view of a world already being despoiled in 1823.

Time's too short to explore this idea fully, but examine the first few paragraphs of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek in relation to Borderlands/La Frontera as these texts grapple with the idea of their sources of knowledge, their senses of place. For example, Dillard's rich texture derives in large part from her allusiveness, her sure control of an amazingly eclectic variety of sources. Her opening description of the tomcat jumping onto her from an open window after a night spent, well, "tomcatting," combines a thread of tradition, "nature red in tooth and claw," with domesticity and the secret world of fecundity beyond the safety of the bedroom. Though her space is invaded by a more-or-less domestic animal "stinking of urine and blood," she is still relatively safe, with only her consciousness disturbed, as if awakened from sleep, by the intrusion of the rutting, fighting animal.

Anzaldua, on the other hand, writes of borders less easily navigated than the open casement. As a mestiza, with elements of Anglo, tejas, Indian and Mexican identity, she lives poised on the knife edge of the border. "It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger, and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape." She goes on to explain the benefits of such a place: "Living on baorders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' environment. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on." I think this idea of being "worked on" is how I see class and place offering means of empowerment.

Much of the class difference is the invasion of borders, the moving from one world to another. For those in the middle class, it's very much of a voluntary situation: they are free to wander, to allow visitors from outside to enter if they please. Anzaldua's borders are far more evanescent, shifting, dangerous: the openings of these two books, the point of entrance into the world of each of these two texts, demonstrate such difference graphically.

Such tensions also appear in writing that I read. In an early draft, a student wrote the following:

I know I said we argued a lot but we still loved each other. That love I speak of is that "home love" where home is the only place you get it. When you're away I'm sure sometimes you may feel loved, but there's a difference. This was the kind of love where if you got in trouble and mom yelled at you, it was like she was yelling at everybody because we all felt bad. No matter who was at fault, we usually at the last minute took the same side. I miss that.

Sometimes when my dad came over I really felt then that home was complete. He's a good man who treats my little brother and sister like they were his kids, too. He always gave us money and it seemed every time he came he would cook dinner. He wanted to marry my mother but due to something in the past she wouldn't. Still, we all enjoyed each other's company.

Most of what I just elaborated deals with the family, but still there's another part to being home. There were the neighbors and my friends. In my neighborhood everyone pretty much knew everybody and like every other neighborhood there were problems. But these are the same problems, some I experienced and some I didn't, that taught me the lessons of how the real world was. I have seen people beaten, stabbed, robbed, and shot, and I made up my mind that I didn't want any part in that and it also made me more determined to get out. But why would I want to leave, knowing I would miss that place, because that place was home?! Would I be taking some of that negative influence with me? It's likely I would.

Here are borderlands inhabited by many of our students. Frustrated by much they see in their immediate worlds, they are nevertheless hesitant to reject some parts of that world because the world is an organic whole; where do you draw the lines, how can you know what to take, what to leave behind? This is the same dilemma the Joads experienced in leaving Chickasaw.

Finally, for the book I considered as many evocations of a sense of home as I could find. How do we understand the mysteries of who we are, from whence we have come, unless we write about the links by which we understand our place in the world and how we move, both with and without others to other landscapes in the world? In "Mountains of the Great Blue Dream," Bob Reid describes how in the library of his Pennsylvania home town he alternately looked at girls and began his lifelong fascination with mountains. In setting forth the ideas of his boyhood, he explains the man who grew from that boy and how hometownscapes prepare us in unknown ways to climb the highest peaks in the world. Further, the best writing will deepen and texture such links by discovering additional parallels. Reid's description of his parents' life line is a breathtaking parallel to the help they give to one another, just like mountain climbers do. And here is a crucial link with class: lower socio-economic class students of course have the highest dropout rates and fail for a variety of reasons, many of which involve problems of identity and self-esteem. Connecting with one another through the medium of writing is one way of building the bonds necessary to keep one another from falling. Thus, the text works as far as possible with collaborative writing and seeks to let each student find ways to explore her home/place/world.

If negotiation is possible, it will be from the physical world, the landscapes, the home places of the disenfranchised or dispossessed, into the larger world of a wider understanding. The final objective here, then, is to see how writing taken from previously unempowered writers who have negotiated the move across borders of class, race, gender can speak to other people of all classes who are about to cross or are in the process of crossing similar borders.

--Peter Valenti, Professor of English, Fayetteville State University, Fayetteville, NC 28301
(910) 486-1903

CS216040

Would you like to put your paper in ERIC? Please send us a clean, dark copy!

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC®

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Paper presented at the 1997 4C's Convention (Phoenix)
Through Nature to Class in the Classroom

Author(s): Peter Valenti

Corporate Source:

Publication Date: March 12-15, 1997

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.

☒

Check here
For Level 1 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) *and* paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 2

☐

Check here
For Level 2 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but *not* in paper copy.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

"I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic/optical media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries."

Sign here→ please

Signature: Peter Valenti

Printed Name/Position/Title: Peter Valenti – Professor of English

Organization/Address:
Department of English
Fayetteville State University
Fayetteville, NC 28301

Telephone: (910) 486-1903

FAX:

E-Mail Address: Valenti@nis1.uncfsu.edu

Date: 11/10/97

(over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, *or*, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

Acquisitions
ERIC/REC
2805 E. Tenth Street
Smith Research Center, 150
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

~~ERIC Processing and Reference Facility~~
~~1100 West Street, 2d Floor~~
~~Laurel, Maryland 20707-3598~~

~~Telephone: 301-497-4080~~
~~Toll Free: 800-799-3742~~
~~FAX: 301-953-0263~~
~~e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov~~
~~WWW: http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com~~

ERIC
Full Text Provided by ERIC