

Why Writing Environments

An Introduction

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Can the extrinsic forces of earth, water, and sky alter the intrinsic elements of language, rhetoric, and imagery?

—William Howarth, “Reading the Wetlands”

This collection looks broadly at the relationships between writing and places, or textuality and places: for instance, how the production of texts and discourse is influenced by the places and environments in which and for which they are produced; how texts and discourse construct places and environments and in turn how these texts influence, affect, and persuade readers; how different cultural and sociopolitical factors affect the production and interpretation of texts that focus on places and environments; and how, in short, writers in various disciplines and professions write when they write about places and environments.

Much practical and theoretical work in English and writing studies already asks similar questions about texts and place, and a good deal of it harnesses work in other disciplines, including but not limited to philosophy, geography, architecture, anthropology, social theory, and history. And much of this work has entered English and writing studies from a variety of critical directions, such as Marxism and other materialist-oriented approaches, feminism, postcolonial studies, popular cultural studies, ecological studies, and so forth. Thus, it is commonplace to suggest that studies of textuality and place are in most cases highly interdisciplinary and highly diverse in their critical methodologies and approaches. Additionally, no one umbrella term exists that adequately characterizes

the diversity of such studies, though one often comes across phrases and terms such as spatial criticism, critical or cultural geography, postmodern geography, ecomposition, or cognitive mapping, just to name a few. Although it is not possible here to summarize all of these scholarly arenas of criticism, a good deal of this work examines not only how place-related metaphors and concepts function but also how various kinds of texts are able to shape places (and vice versa), and, additionally, how different models of place and space limit or expand our understandings of diverse texts, disciplines, peoples, cultures, and the world in general. In a number of disciplinary conversations, furthermore, it is not uncommon to come across studies of how places are conceived as sites of politics, conflict, and struggle; how productions of fictional places occur in novels and how these productions circulate across “real” space; how narratives might endow readers with a heightened sense of place; how discussions of nationalist literatures must attend closely to how these literatures negotiate global places and contexts; and, in short, how places are not static, reified things but instead are open-ended, contradictory processes.

Scholarly criticism that examines places and environments is quite dynamic, complex, and diverse, to say the least. While much of *Writing Environments* taps into these sorts of conversations, this book, however, approaches many of these scholarly and important topics from a slightly different angle and perspective. And it does so with a unique structure and format. *Writing Environments* includes ten original interviews with an array of important writers, most of whom do not work in the field of English or writing studies but whose work is deeply entrenched in the project of better understanding relationships between texts and places, texts and environments. The interviewees are individuals who are concerned with environment from the standpoints of activists, scientists, naturalists, teachers, and visible writers: Rick Bass is a well-known writer of fiction and nonfiction, who is often labeled a “nature writer” and who is known as a vocal activist. Cheryll Glotfelty is best known as one of the founding scholars of ecocriticism, an ecologically based literary criticism that has greatly affected the evolution of English studies and ecomposition. Annette Kolodny is unquestionably one of the most important contemporary literary critics, contributing greatly to work in feminist critical theory. Max Oelschlaeger’s work has changed how we understand concepts of wilderness, asking us to rethink wilderness in historical and philosophical perspectives; his work has earned a Pulitzer prize nomination. Simon Ortiz has earned the reputation as one of the most important Native American writers and poets writing today. David Quammen is best known for his articles that appear in outdoor maga-

zines, such as *National Geographic* and *Outside*. Janisse Ray's book *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* won numerous awards including the American Book Award. Scott Russell Sanders's work has become some of the most frequently anthologized of our time, work that often centers on the importance of place. Two-time Pulitzer prize winner E. O. Wilson has changed the way the world thinks about science and, particularly, its relationships to larger public audiences. And, naturalist Ann Zwinger's books about natural history have given audiences new insight into the way we understand our relationships with places. These are all writers and thinkers whose work often centers on concepts of place and environment, whose work is influenced explicitly by particular places and environments, and whose work influences the way readers see and understand the environments they read about.

Each of the interviews is followed by two short responses written by individuals whose profession is in writing and rhetoric studies; these responses are meant to help draw the interview discussions into the realm of English and writing studies and, in turn, to help develop important lines of thought for these disciplines. We also provided each interviewee the opportunity to respond to the responses to further encourage dialogue among English and writing and those working in other areas who are interested in questions of place and environment. Some of those who participated in interviews chose to write, others did not. Nonetheless, *Writing Environments* contains several important conversations that produce larger dialogues about how issues of environment and place are important to those of us who study discourse and texts of all kinds.

The interviews and responses in this collection take up a number of issues and concerns that are relevant to writers and readers both inside and outside of academia, those who are generally interested in how we come to understand places and environments—and how texts play a role in this understanding. The interviewees in *Writing Environments* represent a diverse range of voices, voices that speak lucidly and captivatingly about topics such as place, writing, teaching, politics, race, and culture, for instance—and how these overlap in many complex ways. Yet these contributors to the book are individuals who—despite their differences—all recognize the importance of contextualizing these interview conversations within particular understandings of place and environment. Thus, the writers we interviewed are people who not only write *about* certain kinds of places and environments but also consider how different environments have influenced them and the production of their texts, and how their writing (and all writing) affects environments and the ways readers experience environments. We chose to interview these ten particular

individuals because many of them are writers whose work is anthologized in composition and literature textbooks and readers (it is becoming uncommon to find a reader that does not include essays and excerpts by, for instance, Rick Bass, Scott Russell Sanders, and E. O. Wilson), or they are writers whose work has been discussed in a variety of scholarly conversations in English and writing studies. The interviewees are all prolific and fascinating writers who have much to tell us about environments, politics, cultures, history, teaching, and, most important, they have much to tell us about writing.

We would like to cite a few qualifications about *Writing Environments*. These qualifications, however, might first need a bit of background about the production of this book. Interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone, and they were recorded on cassette tape to be transcribed later. After transcription, the interviews were sent to the interviewees for initial editing; however, we did ask the interviewees to try not to edit out the conversational tone of the interviews. Most made minor changes only to clarify their positions and to make the interviews more readable. After receiving the edited interviews from the ten interviewees, we solicited scholars in English and writing studies to write responses to these interviews. This, however, is something that warrants careful, honest, and candid attention. To put it bluntly, as Sid Dobrin and Randall Roorda have addressed in detail in their responses, these responses are a bit unfair. The interviewees in this book participated in conversations about environments and about writing, but we only asked them to talk with us informally, to respond to our questions without preparation, without drafting and revising answers. Their answers are impromptu not rehearsed. In contrast, the responses are usually more academic, and contributors have been given time to carefully craft their responses. Randall Roorda says it perfectly in his response to the Ann Zwinger interview: "It's unfair to transcribe what Zwinger treats as a conversation and scrutinize it as if it were a composed, deliberate performance, from which compositionists might expect to elicit insights and applications" (p. 314). It is unfair to do this to any of the interviews; yet, this is specifically what we have asked the respondents to do. It is perhaps even more unfair that we then ask the interviewees to respond to the responses after we put them in the position that necessitates they defend themselves through response.

The concept of interview responses (and the interviews themselves) grows from the interviews and responses that Gary A. Olson published in *The Journal of Advanced Composition (JAC)* over the past dozen plus years and the subsequent books he published with SUNY Press. Prior to

Roorda's critique of this format, there has been little, if any, question of the viability of the interview/response format. There should have been. And yet, we specifically have asked the respondents included in this collection to address these informal interviews as though they had been written in anticipation of response. Likewise, it was probably unfair of us to ask the kinds of questions we repeatedly ask in these interviews, hoping to get the interviewees to give the respondents something to respond to. But what we hoped to develop was specifically a sense of conversation, one that stretched between the academic world and the world of nature writers, biologists, ecologists, activists. We wanted these "conversations" to transcend the unfortunately rigid borders among different academic disciplines and perspectives.

Importantly though, it is not a stretch to say that this book is composed of two different kinds of texts—interviews and responses—that themselves manifest the different places and environments in which discourses and writings are shaped and produced. In short, we might suggest that the responses are a bit unfair to the interviewees because they were produced on different ground, in different environments, which made for these disparities. With this said, however, the numerous and diverse voices in this collection do in fact speak with, to, and against one another in various productive and beneficial ways. The "apples-and-oranges" nature of the interviews and responses, we believe, makes not for a terminal impasse but for further investigations into how environments and places are in fact linked closely with textuality. *Writing Environments*, then, itself is a text that derives from and was shaped by a hodge-podge of environments that to no small degree influenced its production and its conversations.