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BOOK REVIEWS

Reading Ethically

Julie J. Nichols, Book Review Editor

Readers of this journal need no convincing of either the joys of reading or the challenges of teaching. Nor would most of us question the position that serious reading, serious teaching, and please, let's not exclude *fun* reading and teaching, are inextricably tied to questions of ethics. How does reading interact with our agency, guiding us to moral reflection and action—especially the reading of stories but also the reading of poetry and nonfiction? And how, when we teach, whether we teach literature or other content, do ethical questions constrain or direct us in our interactions with our students?

The four volumes reviewed in this issue address these questions head on. Two of the reviewers, Peter Fields and Walter L. Reed, describe the wisdom of Marshall Gregory, a brilliant author and educator of educators, whose *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* was published in 2009 and whose daughter, Melissa Valiska Gregory, collected many of his lectures and discussions on teaching into *Teaching Excellence in Higher Education* in 2013, a year after his death. Both Fields' and Reed's reviews inspired me—an increasingly burnt-out college professor (I will ashamedly confess) whose student evaluations have all too often in the past few years complained about impatience, despite high ratings of knowledge mastery and capacity to assist—to read Gregory for my own benefit. As I took in his calm logic, his appeals to human goodness as well as to sense and intelligence, I wished I had been exposed to Gregory's writing much sooner. Consider his two theses: a) that reading stories has many more complex ethical implications than mere character analysis or plot summary, and b) that every classroom is rife with ethical decisions we teachers are bound, by our commitment to teaching, to consider with deep care. You, too, may feel your attitude shifting, your humility level rising to counteract defensiveness and irritation. Both reviews introduce ways of thinking about teaching, and about engaging with literature, that readers of *JAEPL* will find validating and inspiring. We're lucky to have these excellent accounts of Gregory's work.

The other two reviews are more personal and more literary, but for all that they, too, engage deeply with questions of ethics. The poetry of AEPL's own Laurence Musgrove, whose volume *Local Bird* is beautifully summarized and characterized in Jeffery Taylor's review, looks wryly at the challenges of teaching. Advising students, bemoaning teacherly burdens, describing roller coaster reactions to years of the same predictable questions, the poems invite us to reflect upon and reconsider our stance as professionals working with beloved amateurs. Taylor's well-chosen quotes and apt impressions direct us to Musgrove's wit as well as his wisdom.

Finally, there is Scott Hatch's lyrical review of *The Bioregional Imagination—Literature, Ecology, and Place*, a collection of essays edited by Tom Lynch, Cheryll Glotfelty,

and Karla Armbruster. Hatch is a poet and novelist with a deeply bioregional imagination of his own, and his review reminds us that to attend to *place* is to respond to profoundly ethical conundrums, especially in a world where other values often crowd out nature, beauty, and the wild. We who aspire to expanded perspectives on learning cannot afford to turn away from writing that leads us gently back to those values so that we can lead our students in that same prized direction. As with the focus of Marshall Gregory's nonfiction and Musgrove's poetry on teaching, *The Bioregional Imagination* illuminates content and ethical aspects of our profession which, when we remember them anew, benefit both ourselves and our needful students.

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**Gregory, Marshall. *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives*.
Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2009. 223pp.**

Peter Fields, *Midwestern State University*

Marshall Gregory's operating assumption in *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* is that stories win us over before we have fully engaged our critical faculties. The overriding problem with that level of engagement is not that we enter imaginatively into the storyteller's universe. Quite to the contrary, the joy of narrative is that our willing suspension of disbelief delivers us to an alternative social milieu where we feel we understand the rules of that world, and the nature and habits of its people, better than we understand the rules and people of our own world. The problem in Gregory's view is that we are so taken-over by story—so willing to accept that story on its own terms—that we tend to forget at first why we so readily dispense with the world we do not fully understand in favor of a given author's vision of people, place, and things:

Human beings are eager for the influence from stories because stories' invitations to *feel* in certain ways, to *believe* in certain ways, and to *judge* in certain ways—invitations that we almost always accept—give us deep pleasure and also operate as paradigms and models that we can use as guides for generating the steady stream of firsthand emotions, beliefs, and judgments that we deploy in order to deal with events and people in real life. Our eagerness for fictional pleasure and paradigms, not to mention the nearly ceaseless engagements we have with narratives, cannot help but render us vulnerable to their influence. (168)

In Gregory's view, we are so actively entering into these alternative worlds because we are fundamentally eager, indefatigable students of the human condition—authors of our own being—and want to know better how to conduct ourselves in the confusing world around us. We are far from escapist. Instead, we have sought a teacher and moral guide. Indeed, avid reading may be symptomatic of a special breed of alienation that can never quite bring itself to give up on the world. Such readers graduate to new levels of story and never return to the same story as the same person because they are learning and becoming more adept at discerning what all stories do, even if some are better and

more reliable at it than others, and that is teaching us the difference between what seems right and what is in truth the right thing to do.

In a sense, Gregory is doing something counter-intuitive for a self-confessed lover of narrative: he is giving credence to the Platonic quarrel with narrative, the tension between the ideal republic Socrates envisioned and the story-telling role of the poet. At times, and rather pointedly, he takes up the mantle of the ethical naysayer, suspicious of the power of narrative to enchant before it enlightens: “Plato was dead right—even though he didn’t have *All My Children* or Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals or *The Little Mermaid* to point to—when he claimed that a lot of narratives pander to fantasy (in the worst sense of losing ourselves in ego wish fulfillment), pride, ambition, and unearned fulfillments” (147). At the same time, he is the irreducible champion of that giving-over to the power of story that the best reading not only entices us to do, but also requires for its best effects, morally and aesthetically, and his argument emerges as advocating a kind of razor’s edge. Nothing is gained from story’s power to shape us, morally and spiritually, if we aren’t available to, and aware of, story’s innate properties of ethical vision.

In his own experience, Gregory describes reading as a growth curve where he becomes better over time at understanding and internalizing the ethical model underlying a story as in the case of one of his favorite novels, Dickens’s *David Copperfield*. Gregory describes how over time he grew into a deeper understanding of his own relationship to the protagonist, an immersion in story and outcome reminiscent of what Bakhtin might have meant by the term “dialogic” (150), especially the dialogue between text and reader. At first, seeing so much of himself in the main character, Gregory confesses that he indulged early on in what he feels is the great desire of most people who are born into, and raised within, a “highly dysfunctional family” (4): both the protagonist in the novel and Gregory himself nursed this deep-down, insatiable need for “unlimited sympathy” (146) at the expense of ethical agency; however, as he grew older, he saw in the same character and story the necessity—and role model—for becoming what Copperfield would have called “the hero of my own life” (qtd. in Gregory 149). For Gregory, becoming that hero of his own story has been of never ceasing importance as a catalyst for throwing off moral passivity: “This sentence has been a touchstone for me in times of confusion and uncertainty, helping me return to a clearer and more purposeful sense of myself. It has played this role in my life because it plays this role in the ethical vision of the novel, which is nothing if not an ethical vision of how David Copperfield becomes an independent and self-knowledgeable ethical agent instead of the frightened lump of self-pitying weakness that he was programmed to be” (149-50).

Gregory, it should be noted, allows us to see how his personal story informs his discussion. From the earliest chapters, he gradually unfolds his growing up as a pastor’s kid in a home and church family supercharged by the passion and drama of Pentecostalism and the prophetic authority of a dynamically-wrought “evangelistic fundamentalism” (8) rooted in the diction and cadence of the King James Bible, and not always in his view was he the worse for it: “[...] one cannot withdraw from it linguistically, no matter how far one withdraws from it theologically. Nor have I any desire to lose the sense I had then that salvation might hang on using or knowing just the right word in just the right way” (8).

But his reading over time of Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* reveals the negative side of that experience. Every re-acquaintance with the story heightened his suspicion of what he felt was its emotional extravagance: "This kind of emotionalism for its own sake was all too similar to the anti-intellectual emotionalism of the Protestant fundamentalism I had been raised in, and I knew all too well how easily it could mask limitless forms of self-aggrandizement, selfishness, and cruelty" (159). Ultimately, pivoting between the two novels over time—between *David Copperfield* and *Wuthering Heights*—Gregory developed his critical model. He came to the conclusion that what we ultimately seek in our quest as readers is that story which offers a valid ethical vision of how life might be lived: that is, a "theory of human flourishing" (163).

Probably the most memorable passages of *Shaped by Story* are those where Gregory helps us understand the power of story to engage us at every cognitive level, implying that story is the way our minds were built to think. One of the most compelling ideas (speaking of "just the right word in just the right way") is Chapter Three's first sentence with its felicitous use of alliteration and assonance: "We find stories useful because they *swallow the world whole*, and in fact the domain of stories may be the only form of human learning other than religion that makes the attempt to encompass the entirety of human life and experience" (31, my italics). The thoughtful reader may find this "swallowing whole" the nexus that brings together, and foreshadows, the various strands of Gregory's argument for an ethical criticism. Here we see how his Pentecostal upbringing entwines with the refuge he found in story and how his ever-maturing capacity for critical thinking enters the picture and insists on rigorous, categorical answers. He realizes that what makes story so captivating is that it completes the world and wraps happenstance into a cause-and-effect universe where actions have consequences and moral decisions matter: in other words, "Stories give us *conceptualized* experience" (51).

The experience the author encloses is comprehensive: "The features of the story that make it so much more compelling than any other form of learning seem to be the following: its capacity for holistic representations of human life; its capacity to embed represented lives into a fully realized context of concrete details; and its capacity to vivify and identify those issues about which human beings tend to be in a perpetual froth of concern [...]" (62). The "*pleasure*" (Gregory's italics) of story is not really so much our willingness to suspend disbelief; the key is our willingness "to *escape* the ego, not to imprison all of the world's wonderful diversity *within* the ego" (54). Therefore, reading itself is the first step of Gregory's ethical vision.



Gregory, Marshall. *Teaching Excellence in Higher Education*, ed. Melissa Valiska Gregory. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 257pp.

Walter L. Reed, Emory University

The late Marshall Gregory, long-time Professor of English at Butler University, was a one-man institution as far as the teaching of teaching was concerned. Over several decades, by himself and in person, he led hundreds of faculty members at various colleges and universities across the country to examine the principles and practices of their own teaching, in frank and open discussion with one another. I'm grateful to have played a role, as Director of the Center for Teaching and Curriculum at Emory in the late 1990s, in getting Gregory to bring his unique pedagogy seminar for college teachers, a moveable feast of learning about teaching, to our campus. For twelve years, right after Commencement, Gregory would come for an intensive two weeks of reflection and discussion, devoted to understanding better what it meant to teach undergraduates in and across our various departments and disciplines. He led us, those of us fortunate enough to sign up for the seminar, to think more deeply and talk more critically about what it was we thought we were doing—hoped we were doing—with the students of all sorts and conditions in our various courses across the curriculum. His was a philosophical pursuit of excellence in teaching, posing challenging questions, assigning relevant readings (from dialogues of Plato to recent columns in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*), sharing humorous stories of his own adventures and misadventures with students in and out of the classroom. Other colleagues and students of these fortunate faculty members also benefited indirectly from his probing reflections on pedagogy; the conversations continued to inform discussions of teaching around the campus after he had left.

Shortly before his death of pancreatic cancer in 2012, Gregory completed the manuscript of a comprehensive, wide-ranging discussion of college teaching, drawn from and informed by his own teaching of colleagues as well as students. The manuscript was edited by his daughter Melissa Valiska Gregory, a professor of English herself, and published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. The purpose of this review is to recommend the book to anyone and everyone teaching or contemplating teaching at the college level and hoping to do it well.

The book begins with a funny story about Gregory's awakening to the fact that teaching undergraduate students was disconcertingly different from conducting research as a graduate student. After several stumbling lectures to a class of freshmen on the basics of writing, he acknowledged the raised hand of a student named, he wryly notes, Lee Thundercloud. "After I gave him the nod to speak, he threw a comment at me with deadpan but sulfuric sarcasm, 'Gregory, do you know what the shit you are talking about?'" The teacher suddenly understood that the student was asking him "whether I knew anything about the education he and his peers really needed" (3). It is to this early shock of recognition—that in this sense he really didn't know what he was talking about—that Gregory traces the way he eventually came to teach his classes, the questions he began to raise in his pedagogy seminars, the analysis of teaching topics in his many

published articles, and the book in which he is summing it all up. It was not a once-and-for-all revelation, since the pursuit of teaching excellence is, in Gregory's analysis, a long and arduous process of misdirection and redirection, not a matter of easily mastered techniques. Teaching excellence depends, he argues, on continuing awareness of the difference between the foreground of the intellectual content of the discipline, the subject matter of the course, and salient background issues he identifies. These issues include the fact that "Classrooms are simmering soup pots of ethical dynamics and ethical judgments" (7); that students of college age are not developmentally ready to hear that they aren't as competent as they think they are (8-9); that pervasive narratives about education in popular culture make it hard for students "to take a fresh view of anything going on in their first-hand classrooms because they have participated imaginatively in so many second-hand narrative classrooms" (10); "that human beings tend to forget most of what they learn" (11). These and other problems with pedagogy are the focus of the eight chapters that follow.

It is true that the complete lack of training to teach that Gregory (and others of our generation) encountered in graduate school has changed significantly; most graduate programs these days have put some kind of teacher preparation mechanism in place. But the dynamic background of teaching that Gregory brings to our attention, with incisive observation, engaging humor and persuasive commonsense, is something that our much more intensive training as researchers and publishing scholars still acts to eclipse and obscure. We have one or two "pedagogy courses" in our graduate curricula, compared to dozens of seminars in the fields and sub-fields of our disciplines. My own forty-five years in the classroom, many of them observing the teaching of colleagues and graduate student teaching assistants as well finding my own way, leave me in no doubt about how much we all still have to learn.

Although Gregory's vision is well-informed by the scholarship of teaching, as it has been called, by the findings of cognitive psychology and by the wisdom of humanist tradition (the book includes a 27-page bibliography that is an education in itself), there is nothing arcane, theory-driven or jargon-ridden about his arguments. Although his examples from his own experience favor works of literature, his reflections address the full scope of the liberal arts—whatever we currently imagine them to be. If I were to single out one chapter that I wish everyone would read—and that I intend to assign to graduate students in my own "pedagogy course" next time I teach it—that would be Chapter 4, "Ethical Pedagogy."

For Gregory, the ethics of teaching is not separable from the cognitive skills and habits of mind that teachers, whatever their discipline, hope to develop in their students. "Intellect is intimately entangled with ethos," he argues (77). "The 'who' that any of us is ethically is in large part a function of the 'what' that any of us knows intellectually. The circulatory systems of our intellect and ethos merge with each other all the time and the living blood of influence flows in both directions" (77). Thus ethics is not a set of rules to be outsourced to special workshops on proper academic conduct; rather is it a constant reality of the profoundly social experience of the classroom, where teachers and students are continually negotiating their experience of the reliability of others. Gregory enumerates the unspoken questions students are continually asking of their teachers and teachers of their students. "Are you honest? Are you kind? Are you cruel?"

Are you sensitive and fair, or are you a selfish pig and an insensitive butt head?’ and so on” (82). Understanding this ethical, character-forming dynamic of teaching and learning is crucial to being aware of our students’ point of view, intimately bound up as it is with the formal knowledge of the subjects they are being taught.

Gregory identifies four “ethical commitments” that effective teaching depends on: fairness, respect, charity and civility. He elaborates these in persuasive fashion and distinguishes such ethical dispositions from simple emotional affect or “soft, teacherly squidginess” (90). A teacher who regards himself as a drill sergeant can honor these commitments as well as a teacher with a milder pedagogical persona. The good intentions of a teacher are no more adequate than the good intentions of a student if these commitments are not acted out—and corrected when, inevitably, we fall short. Many of us are angry and resistant to the expectations of “students raised in an age of television and social media” that we should be as entertaining as game-show hosts (91). But that is no excuse for us not to try our best to teach them something different.

Like Socrates, Gregory argues not that we are ignorant of these fundamental issues but that we have been schooled by our own schooling not to pay attention to them. He holds out the possibility of a more philosophical, “mixed disciplinary” conversation among ourselves, a conversation that promises to give us “greater command of our most highly prized teaching objectives, and also give our students the advantages of being in the presence of teachers who know how to think actively not just about the complications of their disciplines, but also about the complicated invitations for ethical influence generated by their teaching in everyday classrooms” (93).

I trust my enthusiasm for this line of argument is obvious. There is a great deal more wisdom and a good deal more wit in *Teaching Excellence in Higher Education* than this brief account of it can convey.



Laurence Musgrove, *Local Bird*. Lamar U Press, 2015. 146 pp.

Jeffery H. Taylor, Metropolitan State University of Denver

Laurence Musgrove’s *Local Bird* is 106 short poems divided into seven sections headed by an Executive Summary, a poem aptly titled “Secrets I Won’t Be Taking to the Grave.” Poetry deals in secrets, the secrets of life channeled through the living. Some of these are personal experiences: “I once threw a no-hitter in slow pitch.” Some are dreams: “If I owned a restaurant, I’d play Count Basie all day and serve BBQ for breakfast.” Some are gnomic pronouncement: “Habits are in the body, not the mind.” These three lines form the first stanza and set a fitting tone for the book. These poems are personal, quirky, an offering of individual revelation by a poet comfortable with the

discomforts of mortal skin and wryly serious about not taking himself too seriously.

Reading these poems is like a long talk with an old friend—the familiarity of experience, our commonalities inscribed by individual vision: “Cherry pie is my favorite, but I’ll take whatever’s left” (11). Some of this Executive Summary interacts directly with other poems. The line “In third grade, I had flashcard anxiety everyday” (7) sets up resonance with the poem “The Same” from the first section, Biography:

But making numbers
Come out the same
Is like when I was 8
And she raised those flash cards
Naming us one by one
To stand and answer (16-21)

We recall the revealed secret anxiety of youth and understand the anticipation of angst that colors so much of mortality, especially so much of the traditional classroom. Indeed, the work and hazards of education are much present in this book by a teacher calmly trying to bring some sense of sanity to the profession. Anyone who has read any of Laurence’s *Tex* comics will recognize the humor that challenges our sense of teaching. Truly most of the best poems are in the first three sections: Biography, Teaching and Learning, Reading and Writing, though there are gems throughout and other themes essential to the personality portrayed.

Section four, Here and Now, is mainly about dogs, though the one that isn’t, “An Introduction to Breathing,” is Buddhist wisdom about expelling fear and inviting compassion, things often best learned from pets living in the moment and giving simply and unconditionally. The best of Here and Now is the last, “Recommendation,” which begins “Here’s a dream/ I’d recommend for you”—an ethereal tumbling of confused angst which ends with the companionship of “a small brown dog” and the sun warming both hearts.

Part five, the volume’s eponymic *Local Bird*, consists of eight light lyrics—at least one may assume tunes attached—pleasant plays on old motifs, notably “If You Want Me,” “Barbecuing in the Rain” and the humorously contemporary “Let Me Be Your iPhone Blues”:

Let me be your iPhone, Baby.
Let me hold your tweets.
Slide your finger up my screen.
My pixels can’t be beat. (1-4)

Deeper and more personal, “Old Lonesome’s Way of Drinking Needles,” is less a song than a fading cultural vignette, and “Practice Blues” is part of any teacher’s standard advice.

Which brings us back to teaching—not the book’s only theme, but one of its strongest. Those of us who live this life easily identify with the perennial joys and hazards of the profession characterized and caricatured with mild humor and perhaps a little fatigue. “Exchange” depicts a first-draft conference with the seeming non-student who “has taken the course/ Twice before and failed” (3-4) and is not actually interested in

learning: “But then I realize oops/ He’s standing before a vending machine/ And I won’t take his dollar” (18-20). “Essay” mildly laments that “Since the beginning of time/ . . . / Student writing hasn’t gotten any better/ Nor is it really any worse than usual” (1, 3-4). The droll humor of the end seems pulled right out of my own life: “Also, I was really hoping for an original title/ And just once my name spelled right” (19-20). Similarly, “Why I Don’t Give Extra Credit” inscribes a mock puzzling over the mundanely obvious. Indeed, there is much herein to induce groaning smiles from any seasoned instructor, though the best pedagogical poem, “Poetry Workshop,” well inscribes deep struggle for meaning:

but the writing of your poem
isn’t the job your brain bosses around
much less your hand;
. . .
It’s riding the fast bareback
to see who can hold on the longest.
The horse is bigger than you are.
So is the poem.
And that’s the life you want. (5-7, 15-9)

In a true sense the poetic is the noetic, and this is why we need poetry—life itself, if you want life, is a struggle with meaning and passion, a wrestling of the dream of self and world into the enigma of consciousness. The poem “Only” promises, “If I am ever/ In one of your dreams/ I will wake you up/ If you ask me to” (1-4), and mirror-resonates with the closing stanza of the Executive Summary’s secrets:

If you’re ever in one of my dreams, I’ll be there too and teach you how to fly.
Every book is a bible.
The hardest thing to find is the thing you hide from yourself. (13-5)

Lost in objectivity, what we hide from ourselves is meaning itself. We push it aside in fear of the brutality of facts and a sense of shame that often goes back to something like “flashcard anxiety” and the meanness of modern praxis insisting that the world is one thing only, reality rather than representation. Yet consciousness itself is representation, and on a basic level all representation is caricature, though not all caricature need be satire or parody. Whatever the wry tone of this poetry intends, the caricature of life presented mainly offers common turns of experience with a smile, like the smooth asides of the Jazz player framing the divinity of a deep riff by acknowledging the audience’s participation in the groove and hoping for nothing more than:

after hours
jazz club
applause
. . .
just a little
smattering
of love (“I Don’t Ask” 11-3, 21-3)

Laurence offers us snapshots of his personal Americana with the gnomic turns of a veteran teacher comfortable with the classroom because he has already rejected anything but the most basic sanctity of the scene. A professor ought to have something to profess; a poet should share secrets profound and mundane—or both at the same time whenever possible. Caricature, on any level, works by inscribing the all-too-familiar with a grin, cutting to the winked assent of consubstantial experience—and the fraught hegemony of consciousness. We nod along with shared incumbencies and snort at the inevitably droll. Yet his caricature is never derision, the humor always a shared lesson. That's teaching—helping others refine and enrich their own inscription of consciousness, their own caricature of this mortal coil. After all the struggle with meaning need not always be grief or angst, though both are inevitable as we lose loved ones and at last our own selves. Rather it should be opportunity, a free shot at meaning anything at all, in spite of life's quick entropy. And that's what good poets do—share their locus of reflection, map and play with the polarity of being—even if the casting is but to toss up recognizable experience too probable to be resisted.

If one is to interpret life, it's best to get on with it and hope for the best. I don't know everything Laurence hoped for in this book—but I know some of it, because a sense of whole life is sufficiently sketched for metaphor to find its place and fill a world within the contours. True voice doesn't crave certainty, though it lives in simple surety. Humor ought to resist the sardonic and remain an innocent wink—so we might tell our own being with convention and conviction void of any existential contention but the most basic: minds exist in opposition to each other but also only because of each other. No fear, no malice, nothing in a wallow—just a friend having a turn in the circle. After all, we *will* take most of our secrets to the grave, for all our promises will be cut short, and as Hotspur sees with the eyes of death, “And time that takes survey of all the world/ Must have a stop” (*IH4* 5.4.82-3).

Finally, this is book of mortal poetry, celebrating the irony of our limitations along with the joy of being, and it ends with the hint of its grave beginning:

Time is not
A rubber band
To stretch forever
And ever amen. (“Amen” 1-4)

So Laurence reminds us that “No matter how/ Much we take on,” no matter how much we acquiesce to the demands of doing, life is lived in reflection and meaning, for:

There's no kindness
Time will give us
Until we say amen
To the time we gave
And sing the song
That comes after
We say amen. (17-23)

Lynch, Tom, Cheryl Glotfelty, Karla Armbruster. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. London: University of Georgia Press, 2012. 440 pp.

Warren Hatch, Utah Valley University

The Bioregional Imagination is a collection of 24 essays constituting a seminal and essential critical conversation on bioregional literary art. The editors of *The Bioregional Imagination* quote Robert L. Thayer Jr. in defining bioregion as:

literally and etymologically a 'life-place'—a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries . . . capable of supporting unique human communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems, and related, identifiable landforms (e.g., particular mountain ranges, prairies, or coastal zones) and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. Most importantly, the bioregion is emerging as the most logical locus and scale for a sustainable, regenerative community. (3)

My bioregion: the Wasatch Front. By great twists of luck, I have just moved into a new office, small, high, but one wall of which is a twelve-foot by twelve-foot south-facing window. A glorious storm of sun warms window boxes full of tomatoes, basil, garlic—elements for a scratch marinara in subzero January. Beyond this microcosmic mud-dauber niche, the great arc of my bioregion spreads to the horizon, a fertile crescent of overlapping alluvial deltas between five and fifteen miles wide and 150 miles long, bounded on the east by the sudden mile-and-a-half upthrust of the Wasatch Range and on the west by the driest desert in the United States—a nearly 500-mile-wide undulating basin and faultblock ridge topography stretching to the Sierra Nevadas. Salt pans and brackish dead seas and occasional alpine islands or more common bone-bare fault block ranges shrivel up from the earth's desiccant crust. Cattle and sheep graze that vast, sparsely grassed, ecologically fragile basin and ridge country. Grazing wars: The Western saga of Saturday afternoon cinema yore mutated into the bureaucratic tedium of a rancher who has gotten behind on his federal land grazing fees, grasping at specious and revisionist familial land heritage arguments—the barbeque-and-beer locus for a fly-on-manure swarm of butt-wagging weekend militia groupies with AR-15s slung across their backs. But this is also the Western saga of overtaken BLM rangers trying to reconcile Federal long-term land policy and local grazing fee-paying ranchers hanging on by their nails to a hard-scrabble day-to-day way of life.

What would a sense of bioregional community and a specific, responsible, and reverentially articulated bioregional ethos that transcends immediate hard-scrabble survival do for that dysfunctional furball of conflicting local and national community interests? It would have to help.

It would have to start with an active, foundational conversation on bioregional imagination; bioregionalism, like all -isms, only becomes real to us through its artistic instantiations, and no viable creative art can sustain itself without careful self-examination and awareness achieved through a thriving critical voice.

The Bioregional Imagination is necessarily far-reaching. And it is a well-edited delight to read. In her review of the collection, Pamela Banting writes, “the influence of Robertson, Thayer, and Snyder flows through many of the contributions like a creek.” I had a similar experience; I think most readers will. All those first friends that we grew up with. Snyder and Berry, Leopold and Stegner, the iconoclastic Moabite Abbey—their voices are carried here into new country on the spreading and intertwining alluvial braids of literary conversation.

It would be inattentive to consider the essays in such a far-reaching collection to be of equal competence and insight. Any extensive survey of an academic field will turn up a few writers tending toward pretentious dullness cloaked in the feathers and robes of academia, to paraphrase Steinbeck (82)—which in a way validates this collection’s extensiveness. But the essays are mostly solid, often brilliant, and even those that nod fill an essential role in the progression of the collection.

The essays in *The Bioregional Imagination* are preceded by the editors’ excellent introduction to bioregionalism and organized into the following lyrical progression: Reinhabiting, Rereading, Reimagining, Renewal—summarized briefly below.

Reinhabiting

Essays on living in-place and restoring damaged environments. “In these efforts to create or re-create a life-place, stories, writing, and publishing projects play an important role. . . . The [essays] . . . show theory emerging from lived experience” (17).

Rereading

Essays on “bioregional literary criticism These place-conscious readings of texts explore the complex dynamics of language systems and ecosystems and of . . . the more-than-human communities in which . . . we are embedded (17).

Reimagining

Essays “expanding the bioregional corpus of texts by coupling bioregional perspectives with other approaches or by challenging bioregionalism’s core constructs” (17).

Renewal

Essays on “pedagogy within the context of English courses, beginning with local habitat studies and concluding with musings on the globally connected environment of the World Wide Web” (17).

The end of the collection includes a bioregional reading list that significantly extends the conversation on bioregional thought. It also includes a well-crafted index (an index!—so useful in such a comprehensive survey).

In the Introduction to *The Bioregional Imagination*, the editors address various potential limitations and critiques of bioregionalism. For example, they discuss the tension between rural and urban in Charles’ pastoral “Where You At?” bioregional quiz and the urban rejoinder, “Wha’ Happenin” by Bennett et al. Of course, the tension between perspectives is mostly good-natured and humorous, but also, the different perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive; furthermore, they inform each other. And I think

that is the point of bioregionalism—a sense of dwelling shared, enriched, and as a nexus of communion.

To extend this idea, here is a final example: the editors discuss the tension between global and local socio-environmental concerns, in which bioregionalism is identified primarily as “local.” Perhaps our inclination to dichotomize lies in the analytical DNA of western culture; I wonder if a Zen-like logic structure might be more useful. That is, rather than representing the local in a dubious dichotomy between global and local, wouldn’t bioregionalism be much more usefully and accurately posited as a nexus?—bioregionalism as a contextualized and wholistic commons of shared narrative between global and local communities? If you want to understand the universal, study the microcosmal (contextualized in the bioregional ethos), for in sharing the narratives of how to dwell in specific bioregions, we begin to understand their global contexts. The romantically and pastorally grounded poet Leslie Norris used to give his elementary school children a task of bringing a stone in from recess and writing down seven concrete, specific adjectives describing the rock—nothing metaphoric, nothing symbolic. But none of them could ever resist metaphoric trope, and most only lasted three or four words. Only one child ever got to six, and on the seventh word said, “My rock is like a world.”

A final thought on *The Bioregional Imagination*: On a July day in the mid-1990s, I stood on the Hayden-Agassiz ridge of Northern Utah’s Uinta Range with my sons, eleven and eight years old, surrounded by that twelve-thousand-foot above-treeline country of rock and sun, of light and wind. The Hayden Bell tower, our goal, loomed a few hundred vertical feet above us by way of a couple more jungle-gym chimneys and forgiving traverses. Below us, spruce and fir forests filled the lower Uinta basins to the horizon. “Lothlórien,” my older son said. A knot registered under my ribs. A new and nearly undefinable pall and Koyaanisqatsi-whisper of death hung across those high pure forests. Maybe a slight tinge of gray. Maybe a slightly larger percentage of dead conifers among the thriving forests. “You ought to look at these forests carefully and try to remember them,” I said. “I think they will die, and you will want tell your sons about them when you bring them to stand here.” This must be a little of what it feels like to be a prophet, I thought.

Pine sawyer beetles thriving in the lengthening summer seasons and warming winters. Drought resulting from shifting weather patterns. In the decades since then, those forests have nearly died—joining the many dead and dying great conifer forests throughout the Western United States. (See Hillary Rosner and Peter Essick’s “The Bug that’s Eating Our Forests” in *National Geographic* April 2015 for a contemporary account of this phenomenon.)

You have heard the same whisper in your own bioregion, in its own specific language of pain and loss. The science is overwhelming: the great challenge for our generation and for our children and their children is the challenge of sustainability, of environmental stewardship. But (1) humans seldom make rationally and empirically based decisions. And (2) we do act on emotion, and art—the specific and sensory narrative artifact, Silko’s world made of stories (88)—is the gateway to emotion. And finally, (3) any thriving artistic tradition cannot be achieved let alone sustained without a self-awareness resulting from being enfolded in and conversant with a thriving literary criticism.

Hence the necessity of this seminal book.



Works Cited

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