



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Is Nature Necessary?

Fresonke, Kris, 1966-

American Literary History, Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp.  
129-143 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



➔ For additional information about this article  
<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/alh/summary/v018/18.1fresonke.html>

# Is Nature Necessary?

Kris Fresonke

*A mind that opened itself fully to nature without sentimental preconception would be glutted by nature's coarse materialism, its relentless superfluity. An apple tree laden with fruit: how peaceful, how picturesque. But remove the rosy filter of humanism from our gaze and look again. See nature spuming and frothing, its mad spermatic bubbles endlessly spilling out and smashing in that inhuman round of waste, rot and carnage. From the jammed glassy cells of sea roe to the feathery spores poured into the air from bursting green pods, nature is a festering hornet's nest of aggression and overkill. Nature is the seething excess of being.*

**Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae***

Nothing holds American literary criticism together more impressively than the fight for territory, whether this means an office space land rush in the English department or contests over certain American landscapes and the texts written about them. In both cases, the struggle keeps the strugglers distracted and happy. And in both cases, the turf points up any ideological tensions we want it to, whether we mean the divide between cubicles (adjuncts) and suites (endowed chairs), or we mean to decide which examples of nature writing (Spanish, British, or Native American) make up the canon and thus determine the shape of the nation. But unlike a good old committee squabble over desk space, so forceful in its farce, so gratifying in filling empty university rooms with meaning, the fight to settle which landscapes came first in the national canon has, finally, the touch of the void. No matter what this fight sponsors, no matter what the opponents claim is at stake, no matter what arguments come into view, it is a land without qualities. Its positions seldom exceed the level of special pleading. It is, as the mathematicians say, not even wrong. For as we seek the first instance of nature in American literature, we flounder out of history. On the other hand, as we enfold our landscapes in history, nature is made merely into a proposition. Between essences and ideas lurk the dark fields of the republic.

*From the Fallen Tree: Frontier Narratives, Environmental Politics, and the Roots of a National Pastoral, 1749–1826*

By Thomas Hallock  
University of North Carolina Press, 2003

*Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*  
Edited by Michael Branch  
University of Georgia Press, 2004

*An Outdoor Guide to Bartram's Travels*  
Edited by Charles D. Spornick, Alan R. Cattier, and Robert J. Greene  
University of Georgia Press, 2003

*The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity*  
By Ralph Bauer  
Cambridge University Press, 2003

And so we beat on. The problem is that in sizing up American landscapes, our critical solipsism dictates that we seldom even know what we mean by nature. Here are some of the ways American nature is currently misread:

1. Nature is a construct.
2. Nature is tragic.
3. Nature is in good taste.

I will discuss each of these. For purposes of this essay, I mean “nature” primarily as American landscapes and wilderness. I also bring into play the broader philosophical sense of the word, as in everything-but-man-and-art, but only advisedly.

Along the way, it is worth noticing a few corollaries to current questions of American land and landscape, such as what drives the effort to find out whether Spain or Great Britain prevails in the inauguration of New World nature writing (which is what most critical inquiries about the American canon boil down to). If we knew the answer to that, goes the logic, then it would expiate us from the American imperial present. Other questions arise from the insistence that we simply Hispanicize the canon, and further, that we always confer special expertise over nature onto Native Americans. In general, the critical mood is Marxist tingling combined with Romantic tears—a mix considered to be especially germane to the case of nature, because it results in a recent, but already lifeless, school of criticism. Who would fardels bear but for the dread of something worse than death, like *ecocriticism*?

### 1. Nature Is a Construct

Trace science then, with modesty thy guide;  
 First strip off all her equipage of pride;  
 Deduct what is but vanity, or dress,  
 Or learning's luxury, or idleness;  
 Or tricks to shew the stretch of human brain,  
 Mere curious pleasure, or ingenious pain;  
 Expunge the whole, or lop th' excrescent parts  
 Of all our vices have created arts;  
 Then see how little the remaining sum,  
 Which serv'd the past, and must the times to come!

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*

Early national landscapes and the texts about them have mostly come in for critical assaults on their *constructedness* (even by opponents of constructionism), a position so stale by now that one yearns for the quaintly totalitarian ideals of New Critics.

The present sensibility, one of hysterical skepticism mingled with moral earnestness, finds no other course logically but the immunity and innocence of nature, against the venal, incessant constructing-ness and polluting of humanity. This position is not new, but in its current form it has none of the wit or joy that, say, Shakespeare knew when he accurately described the unloveliness and intemperance of an English summer's day.

But let us admit at least that constructs are sometimes constructed. It is fair enough, for example, to point out that in the writings of the conquistadores, Indian maidens' eroticism (say) probably *was* all in the minds of the beholders. Likewise, naming rivers after Greek gods, or reptile species after Roman poets, or a whole continent after an Italian buccaneer—these are all gestures that suggest a certain grandiose imposition of what is inevitably called “baggage” (and never, say, “wit”) onto the scene. (Oddly, the best explorers seem to quote Byron at moments of greatest narrative need. Byron, meanwhile, was merrily perusing the tale of Daniel Boone, reports Thomas Hallock in *From the Fallen Tree: Frontier Narratives, Environmental Politics, and the Roots of a National Pastoral, 1749–1826* [65].) Critical indictments are solemn in such moments of baggage, over the tools of conquest and the jaundiced imperial eye. Language, we are urged to recall, precedes nature. “What holds [exploration writing] together,” contends Hallock, “is the effort to *construct place*, the desire to expand imperial realms through the charting of nature” (31, emphasis added). And this: “How, using language developed to describe European nature,” wonders Michael Branch in *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*, “does one depict the marvel of a possum?” (xiv). The editors of *An Outdoor Guide to Bartram's Travels* (a field guide to the *Travels*), Charles Spornick, Alan R. Cattier, and Robert J. Greene, likewise call attention to William Bartram's poignant “*need to provide examples of the balance in nature*” (xviii, my emphasis). And for Ralph Bauer in *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity*, nature writing is way beyond nature and about “geopolitical knowledge” and “modernity,” otherwise known as Baconian philosophy. Bacon knew that to go about stripping New World scientific data of metaphor results in some peculiar claims about the difference between mines and furnaces. Bauer explains that explorers consider themselves mere miners of raw materials when they are actually doing the formative work of smiths; they cling pitifully to their convictions that firsthand

accounts are transparent, immediate, and unrefined. So much for the division of labor.

No doubt all these narrative infirmities are evidence that explorers' texts are imbalanced and defective. They even suggest that exploration narratives are not politically dispassionate (nor, for most twenty-first-century critics, politically orthodox) and that inside such a text, nature is object—or even abject. For some decades now such bland indictments, chronic and workmanlike and unexceptional, have unaccountably piled up; the contempt for claims of “order, pattern, and meaning” (Hallock 22) is absolute. Our best minds have boldly shown that nature is not transparent, and the case seems unbeatable—if a bit dull. It is as morally safe, and as lackluster, as the contention in nineteenth-century studies that slavery is wicked. (In Bauer's learned but limited study, the dull case reaches so far that nature drops out altogether. He argues that colonials might well have witnessed nature firsthand but that the important thing is that their “knowledge” busily influenced, and was influenced by, the “knowledge” back in the metropolis. It is the best history of Creole cringing we have yet.)

But this worn-out case could easily have been made strong and new. This very same evidence of flaws shows us something extraordinary: the deep joy of exploring in nature. Not out of raw hopes of experiencing actual discovery—for we seem to have seen through that proposition, too—but rather out of the tedious, sloppy hackwork that goes into exploration writing, in its glorious mess of imperial hunger and cognitive disorder and sham facticity and field hazards, all spilling from its *baggage*. Episodes of narrative shabbiness in nature writing are so plentiful that it is about time we took them seriously and read them competently. If nature is a construct, its decrepit scaffolding has still not been accurately described.

For at one time reading exploration narratives into the American canon took guts, making unconventional and unliterary and sometimes bad prose into the companions of familiar verse and drama and novels. This true grit is no longer called for, as one now notes a somewhat ritualized inclusion of explorers onto the rolls of assigned texts: Zebulon Pike is the new Frederick Douglass. And with this upgrade comes, one hopes, an advance in our understanding past mere sufferance or contention, into positive delight and more candid, less deferential readings. It is a great pleasure to go through a botched couple of lines from Hakluyt, or Bartram, or Meriwether Lewis, such as this one included in Michael Branch's anthology, describing the Great Falls of the Missouri in June 1806—one euphorically ungrammatical sentence: “The height of the fall is the same as the other but the irregular and somewhat projecting rocks below receives the water in its passage down and breaks it into a

*Episodes of narrative shabbiness in nature writing are so plentiful that it is about time we took them seriously and read them competently. If nature is a construct, its decrepit scaffolding has still not been accurately described.*

perfect white foam which assumes a thousand forms in a moment sometimes flying up in jets of sparkling foam to the height of fifteen or twenty feet and are scarcely formed before large rolling bodies of the same beaten and foaming water is thrown over and conceals them" (qtd. in Branch 206). Elsewhere, a few pages later, Lewis shows off with landscape allusions to Salvator Rosa, but this passage is the finer one, quite possibly the best waterfall sentence in American literature. And the pleasure comes not just from the knowing reader's quickness over the cascade of phrases in a wordy cataract. Rather, there is delight in Lewis's jumbled shifts from singular to plural and back; and in his haphazard fascination with the words "height" and "foam."

William Clark was always the worse speller of the two, but readers eventually find him a rough draft of Huckleberry Finn; learned Lewis's imperfections are what tell us more about exploration writing, just as fickle Tom Sawyer is probably the key to that story of the fugitive slave. Branch was right to include this moment in his anthology (and narrowing 12 volumes of Lewis and Clark to only six pages must have been excruciating); it is Lewis quite imperfectly. The mild badness of Lewis's sentence is its goodness. It displays an emotional state akin to wonder or awe, and it is artful without being forced, as any eighteenth-century writer could manage effortlessly. It is also weak enough to permit the waterfall to come powerfully into view. Lewis's erudition and aesthetics are much belabored in episodes like this one, but they are not strong enough to stand in the way of the Great Falls. It is perhaps as close as we can get to a conclusion hotly denied: that this excerpt is nearly transparent writing about nature as an object.

We know this because while the passage offers a scene of natural splendor (during which our habitual constructedness muscles are twitching), later it describes another of nature's attributes, namely its perils: bears (one chases Lewis into the river), wolves (Lewis shoots one), snakes (Lewis kills one), and prickly pear cactus (buffalo, giving chase, steer the barefoot Lewis into one). Nature is so full of danger that every time he is late back, Lewis's companions give him up for dead: "they had formed a thousand conjectures, all of which equally foreboding my death, which they had . . . settled among them" (211).

Perilous nature for Lewis, as well as for Bacon, was an object, and both grasped its objectification in the wise manner that all objectifiers do: knowingly and, one might even say, consciously. Nature will kill Lewis, and until it does, he can admire it but will never be duped by it.<sup>1</sup> These conditions apply, also, to desperados of the Spanish conquest, to doomed Virginians, to baddie Puritans, to beaver-deranged French trappers—even to the head librarian of

Walden Pond. (One assumes that Mohicans, Algonquins, Cherokees, and Lakotas meet the same criteria.) Human interaction with nature is varnished and has no innocence, but that's not entirely because humans are fallen: nature is fallen, too. Explorers knew this. Even Emerson knew this, detecting transcendent and "kindly" nature inside his study and his pulpit, never spoiling the view with particulars. And the fleet Joyce Carol Oates knows this, complaining of nature that "its pleasures lack resonance, being accidental; its horrors, even when premeditated, are equally perfunctory" (236).

Nature's ferocity and cruelty don't even have the handy moral language that human ferocity and cruelty have. Instead, nature is vacantly pitiless, inertly savage, indifferently bad. (I mean "nature" here in its dual senses of "American wilderness landscapes" and also "phenomena outside human design.") It pricks our feet, but unfeelingly. The only thing missing from Branch's fine anthology is a truly extravagant index, because the entry under "nature" would also have included the following: hurricanes, grizzlies, mosquitoes, frostbite, boils, blizzards, avalanches, vermin, sharks, heat, short rations, no rations, earthquakes, storms, droughts, floods, alligators, and worms.

The moral inertness of nature, combined with its brutality—even the possibility that nature *has* real qualities like these—is currently unthinkable. A Puritan might find in nature's comets the omens of sin, Branch points out (xviii), while Columbus saw converts and John Smith saw profits; but we, *claiming* to see our own furnaces, mine only a latter-day environmental guilt so formless and woolly that even the wide reach of American Calvinist terror cannot account for it. (Nature is often enlisted, for entertainment purposes, to hold seminars in human folly. The recent film *The Day After Tomorrow* [Roland Emmerich, 2004], in which the entire planet dies in a fit of temper at Dick Cheney's ties to the petroleum industry, has nature attacking humanity by flash-freezing it. The targets include that archive of our depravity, the New York Public Library, where humans seek refuge and build fires out of books. But the freezing sub-sub-librarian is foolish enough to want to save a copy of the Gutenberg Bible, thus guaranteeing that after the thaw, culture will carry on and nature's weighty lesson will not have been learned.)

We might recover from our constructedness hangover by conceding a bit of ground to essentials. "Cleave to the malady," advised the cheerful Samuel Beckett.<sup>2</sup> Given that nature's tool of conquest is always death and that very few of us deconstruct death but instead simply die, it seems faint-hearted not to maintain that European bloodlust in the New World was comparatively merciful and short-term compared to nature's fury.

And at the same time, one can also make a strong case against the sappiness of ecocriticism, which claims not to traffic in constructs at all.

## 2. Nature Is Tragic

In nature there is nothing melancholy,  
But some night-wandering Man . . . he and such as he  
First nam'd these notes a melancholy strain.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Nightingale"

The organ of ecocriticism is the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), whose motto is "I'd rather be hiking." Ecocritical activities besides hiking are uninteresting. And ecocritics are confused, because what began as a heady crusade against the excesses of the Enlightenment—namely, to read literature for currently-approved environmentalist positions—has turned frivolous and (if one follows the debates at ecocritical headquarters) declined into bickering. As early as 1993, the premise of a criticism based on the earnest apprehension of nature, free of constructs and Theory, faced a knock-down argument by Alan Liu, who observed that "there is no nature; there is only history" (qtd. in Wallace 15). (The best riposte that ecocritics could fling back was, of course, not ideas but lifestyle: they declared the opposition "suburban." In fact that is false: Professor Liu lives in Santa Barbara.) But ecocritical axioms have persisted. Some of the writers under review here are under their spell. They consist mainly of the tragic fallacy.

In the ecocritical formulation, still contagious in its tone if not in party affiliations, scenic nature is inevitably brought low. Maimed by greed and contamination, nature (and significantly, *not* history) offers the spectacle of waste and ruin that our human appetites create and then crave. Persecuted wilderness has come to stand in for all of nature, and Hallock is at his best when he wonders when we might "move beyond a mournful rhetoric of loss" (18) and at a height of lucidity when he defines wilderness as simply "land before white settlement" (19) rather than a scene of "environmental degradation" (Branch xxiii). (Even in the spiky jargon of Bauer, the blue note likewise creeps into American nature's "fatality" [119].) But the detractors of ecocriticism still recur to tragedy, namely in Hallock's choice of the pastoral mode for reading frontier writings. Hallock rightly finds the pastoral an American narrative form that is not innocent (ideological-pastoral,



tragic-historical, tragic-comical-historical-pastoral-ideological); he has digested Leo Marx. That analytical tact, though, obliges a forced march into readings of the American pastoral as “elegy” (212)—for lost tribes, and (one gathers) for Israel herself. A central example here is James Fenimore Cooper, whose obsolete Federalist sense of history, and whose sunny Jacksonian sense of racial succession, are an obvious source for pastoral eyewash. The correct way to read Cooper, advises Hallock, is as a peppy nationalist dirge about “dispossession” (200); he calls *The Pioneers* “the first ecological novel written in the United States” (201), because it assesses human impact on nature. Perhaps better, the first ecological-tragic novel: the dying fall is its forced subtext, inasmuch as nature is called by Hallock more than four times “a contested site,” and the contest always results in wreckage to the land, not just (as I read Cooper) in a fairly dull change of proprietors. So much for the garden. And so much for the machine. In a fine digression, Hallock defines the pastoral as a “recognition of loss . . . set against material advantages that [one] does not fully reject” (205). This definition might be unmuzzled a bit to suggest more about what material advantages one not only doesn’t reject but *embraces*. What would criticism be like if we stopped embracing nature tragically? The material advantages of ecocriticism, or of its fellow travelers, are in the suspended pastoral moment of nostalgia, free of real activism or thought.

(It is much better to describe declension where it really exists, such as in Spanish musings about racial hierarchy. Bauer is a knowledgeable Hispanicist and in one chapter has paired the celebrated captivity text by Mary Rowlandson with one by the little-known Chilean Creole Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán [*Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson*, 1682 and *The Happy Captive*, 1977]. Bauer’s invention of the Creole as a category of knowledge is extremely persuasive, but it has little to do with natural history, even though it is vaunted as a Baconian enterprise. Why didn’t Bauer just write a book about race?)

There are other muddles. Ahistorical, antiscientific, sentimental, and besotted with its own ethics, ecocritical approaches to literature flaunt their referentiality—the nonconstructedness of nature in the texts they love best, usually first-person essays about scenery—as if they’d somehow vanquished suburbia merely by finding it unworthy of prose. (See Section 3 of this essay, on good taste.) The ecocritical premium placed on smugly apprehending *real nature*—an unidealized thing swiftly installed into the ideal mold of tragedy—leads at best to snobbery (why aren’t Alan Liu’s boots *muddy*?) and at worst to disingenuous evangelical eco-nonsense, all mood and no matter. Killing animals is the most shocking moment in nature writing for many readers: Hallock marvels that Bartram “may love the

sound of a sandhill crane in flight, but he can eat the bird in his soup" (169). Branch's introduction is principled to the point of PETA-philia on the subject of what we must be thinking when we read about animals throughout history being shot: "gratuitous trophy hunting" (xxiv), "immoderate slaughter" (xix), and "the aristocratic entertainments of hunting and falconry" (xviii) urge us to retroactive vegetarianism. But these are not *real* falcons, nor even real aristocrats. Real falcons, like all real carnivores, attach a certain importance to immoderate slaughter.

Although Branch recommends that we "study forms of environmental representation that we find ideologically offensive" or "alien" or "flawed" or "ignorant" (xxiv), the ideology of a tragic nature ravished by bloodthirsty upper-class carnivores—as opposed, for instance, to nature bloodthirstily ravished by nature itself—holds firm. The class rebuke is hard to miss here. In any case, this dumbshow of land rape narratively and critically defeats even so fluent an upper-class empiricist as Meriwether Lewis, an outstanding shot who would have tamed the falcon, named its species, and then used it to slaughter an animal, which he would also have named and perhaps sketched and either eaten or sent to Philadelphia for study. I have no doubt that this description of hunting is savage, but how else does meat come forth from the eater? Branch's own anthology contains, by way of an answer, the wonderful description by William Bartram of Florida alligators—the same reptiles that had just attacked Bartram himself—immoderately slaughtering fish:

[T]housands, I may say hundreds of thousands, of [fish] were caught and swallowed by the devouring alligators. I have seen an alligator take up out of the water several great fish at a time, and just squeeze them betwixt his jaws, while the tails of the great trout flapped about his eyes and lips, ere he had swallowed them. The horrid noise of their closing jaws, their plunging amidst the broken banks of fish, and rising with their prey some feet upright above the water, the floods of water and blood rushing from their mouths, and the clouds of vapor issuing from their wide nostrils, were truly frightful. (189)

Tyger, tyger, burning bright, has Camille Paglia seen the light? Nature is not inert and passive, nor pitiful and tender, as any explorer would know; only guilty people see victims everywhere.

In fact, the favorites in ecocritical literature don't so much show us nature as make nature into the cameraman's assistant for a documentary—or maybe a snuff film—on the passivity of nature, so there is no question of its ever being *real*. The literary elect are

postindustrial hobbyists, such as Henry Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Edward Abbey. Barred from membership are writers for whom nature is a menace, such as Melville, Poe, Mencken, Pound, Faulkner, Ellison, Nabokov, Oates, Updike, or Bishop. Or Toni Morrison. Or Joan Didion. Or Robert Frost. The dominant form, as Branch rues of this canon, is “the nonfiction personal essay that sympathetically describes nature *and the authorial response to it*” (xvii, emphasis added). Nature-consumers vaunting their credentials and integrity, such authors write (often not well) to confirm their goodness and to indulge in the tragic fallacy, and its subdivision natural virtue. We’d rather they were hiking.

The ecocritical canon, in other words, is typically made up of footnotes to Rachel Carson, a writer lacking urbanity and sense, with a prose style far worse than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s. (A biography notes, by way of credentials, that the undergraduate Carson “changed her major from English to biology” [Budwig 19].) The famous first lines of *Silent Spring*— “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. . . . Then a strange blight crept over the area. . . . Some evil spell had settled. . . . The people did it to themselves” (1–3)—is a hallucination uncannily like *The Book of Mormon*, whose first chapter offers this: “Wo, wo unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations! Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem—that it should be destroyed and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi I). Our ecocritical wilderness is read as a lost world, and the pose of referentiality is a basic part of the fantasy. In the case of Joseph Smith, many non-Mormons indulge in a certain amount of heckling about his American historical claims, his theological soundness, and his prose. But when the subject is American nature, sketched also as Jerusalem by Carson (with bombast and fraud equal to Smith’s), we are toothless, because with nature, feeling reigns. So much for philosophical nominalism. So much for philosophy. As if it were aristocrats corrupting nature with “entertainments,” ecocriticism has corrupted nature with the fear of death.

### 3. Nature Is in Good Taste

Show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs. . . .

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”

Speaking of subdivisions, the suburban reader will be wondering why ASLE has it in for him and what works of literary criticism might come to his defense.

The answer is, hardly any. Over one-half the American population (52%), along with a few academics, lives in the suburbs. For many, their sole experience of nature is in the parks and lawns of those communities or in the token greenery that fills out the median on the freeway, neither one well designed nor credibly wild. Criticism of American nature writing, however, is from the enforced perspective of Walden Pond, or the Grand Canyon, or perhaps Yosemite, three of our oracles. From any of these points of view, though, nature looks odd—odd in that relatively few have seen it.<sup>3</sup> Strictly for teaching American literature, both the New England transcendent and the Western sublime are just abstractions to students outside these rarified regions, where most of us probably hold classes. More broadly, our landscapes, East and West and South and Midwest, farmland and suburb and city, do not look anything like these three shrines and hardly ever have. Even before the suburbs were invented, American nature was already squalid, as Patricia Limerick has gleefully reminded us; Western explorers very seldom failed to stumble into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century trash heaps. Rumors of its death are greatly exaggerated: American nature is just reliably filthy.

In other words, in its lately suburban but ever-dirtied forms, American nature is not a place of visual and literary good taste—except in those vacation preserves made famous by Thoreau and Muir. Criticism of American nature writing, however, labors at times under the pressure to make nature elegant, pretty, and anodyne, displaying only birds by Audubon, peaks by Adams, flowers by O’Keefe, and beachfront property by Homer. Its qualities are aesthetic and hygienic. The treatment of William Bartram’s *Travels* in some of the books reviewed here is a case in point.

Branch’s general introduction rightly makes demands on us to take no notice of taste and “imagine [American nature] without the benefit of any of the ideas, insights, information, achievements, methodologies, technologies, institutions, or assumptions” of the past five centuries (xxvii). We might then have to do without his headnotes to each entry in the anthology, including Bartram, and that would be a shame. But surely nature is not empty of qualities: the fight is over which description prevails. Bauer, who does not write about Bartram, is interestingly preoccupied with an analogous case, of nature being described not from imperial headquarters but from its franchise bureaus, namely the colonies. So skeptical and disparaging were officials receiving intelligence from “imbecile” colonial governors that those governors had to invent a whole new

system of credibility and authority in their writings, tied to the New Science and the rise of the novel—forms that they incidentally helped establish. Their insistence on first-person accounts changed the way the home office understood scientific knowledge. I am in sympathy with the problem Bauer describes, of making the home office believe in the integrity of field reports; it is a bit like reading today's bemused *New York Times* for news about the Far West. Meriwether Lewis's troubled final months were made more unpleasant by the harassment of government clerks in Washington, DC, over his expenditures for supplies; that he lost no men in four years (save one to a burst appendix), or that he returned with thousands of new species, or that he had solved the question of the Northwest Passage seemed to them unimportant next to his balance sheets. From Bauer's account we discover that nature in corporate or imperial (or probably critical) headquarters cannot retain its eclecticism or its violence or its dirt or its rot. It is tasteful and refined, or it is disbelieved. If nature is a reflection of our human outlook, then there are two corollaries, one worse than the other. First, how shabby the human outlook is in its received ideas about beauty; and second, how trivial nature is to be detectable only through taste. It hardly seems worth keeping.

In Hallock's analysis of Bartram, the issue of taste comes up over the Alachua Savanna near Gainesville, Florida, a place that inspired reveries in Bartram but that when "viewed today . . . does not strike most Americans as immediately remarkable. The prairie lacks the jaw-dropping beauty of the Grand Canyon or Yosemite, biodiversity alone not being enough" (167) for celebrity and tourism. Distractingly, Hallock considers that Bartram's paeans to the region "suggest an enthusiasm that very few modern readers share and therefore a distance between eighteenth-century and contemporary environmental aesthetics" (168). Veiling taste in the term "aesthetics" is all well and good, but what about the term "distance"? For whom, and from what? To judge by a guide to Bartram's Florida, no airy speculation about distances to "the botanic self" (159) is necessary. The reason that Alachua Savanna is unpopular with tourists today is not our boredom with Augustan sublimity; it is because US 441 bisects the area, making biodiversity a memory and that stretch of road "Florida's deadliest highway" (144).

Outside of literary criticism, there are genres that manage to compose nature in ways that do not flatter our sophistication, such as field guides. One of the more agreeable descriptions of nature writing is to be found in the guidebook by Spornick, Cattier, and Greene to hiking the Bartram Trail through the Carolinas and Florida: "A good guide . . . says where there is water but does not marvel about rainbows in mountain cataracts. It talks of steep, pitched

ascents without overwriting the view. . . . [T]he guide speaks to the body while seducing the imagination" (xvii). This good guide is also delightful, following Bartram chronologically through hundreds of miles of water and trail and sidewalk, leading us to the highlights of his journey. It is bracing to read something on Bartram that does not belabor the reader's moral position with bullying about ecological rectitude or multiculturalism, two of the foundations of nature's tastefulness for other critics. Instead, we get adventure. Some Bartram fans will know to turn immediately to page 162 about the Upper St. Johns River, where one may visit the famous "Battle Lagoon" where Bartram fought off "Monstrous Alegators" all night and watched them gorge themselves on fishes (see Section 2, above). We also discover in a field guide a literary fact left out of other accounts; namely, that Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" borrows its images of bubbling waters from Bartram's description of the great springs of Florida. The guide notes sweetly that the only hazard in canoeing these waters, in a detail that Coleridge himself would have liked, is that "water hyacinths may jam the stream" (170). Bartram is presented historically, though not heuristically; the air is fresher for it.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is a country established by leaders of an independence movement, founded in a theory of contractual government and individual liberty. Its concepts of nature are mixed, but one of its foundational myths is that wilderness is there for the profit of its citizens. This profit can take the form of industry or simply of vast property holdings for individual happiness. For people of this country, a place officially tolerant of all religious faiths, nature's bounty is a sign of God's special approval.

There is a country born recently that roughly follows Enlightenment concepts of science in its management of vast natural resources and unassimilated indigenous peoples. Neither the natural resources nor the indigenous peoples have entirely benefited from this approach, but the nation's current ecological and civil rights movements have had only limited success in redressing the notions bequeathed them by the eighteenth century. The landscape, though stunning, has inspired a certain Romantic lonesomeness.

There is a country whose tyrant was overthrown, but it did not meanwhile enfranchise certain members of its population. Its natural environment was undeveloped outside the cities, and many citizens farmed. Nature for this country was understood as a garden when it was not glimpsed as a frightening waste. The religious life of many

citizens was bound up in work and prosperity, all based on developing nature along those lines dictated by God.

The countries described above are India, Peru, and Iraq. If their ideologies of nature sound American, that is not surprising. Nature writing may finally not qualify as that thing that sets American literature apart. It is sufficient but not necessary. It is an explanation rather than a cause. And in the same way, the books reviewed here all deal in explanations. Our understanding of nature writing drifts easily into the terms of explanation and sufficiency, whether it is to adopt the Hispanic nature canon, as in Bauer; or to rework the terrain of the pastoral, as in Hallock; or to grieve for the lost garden, as in Branch; or cheerfully to promote tourism, as in Spornick, Cattier, and Greene. “All sentiment is right” grumbled David Hume (6), whose suspicion of causes might have been a better starting point for some of the critical explanations reviewed here.

The American resistance to urbanity—both in the sense of being *citified* and of being *sophisticated*—is one starting point of our obsession with nature, and perhaps it cannot be rationalized as either a cause or an effect. But it is nonetheless a form of provincialism. It moves Americans, even in their conquest over nature, to want to mimic nature’s localism and crudity. It bars irony and instead brings in simple fraud. In the relentless effort to be like nature, fruitful and multiplying, we are still faking our love of it. It cannot found a school of literature, or a school of criticism, or a country. It cannot be loved. Obscure and illegible, mean and dirty, immovable and unmoved, nature fails us, again and again and again.

## Notes

1. Most readers will know that nature did not kill Meriwether Lewis; Meriwether Lewis did. He committed suicide in October 1809.

2. Beckett’s line may be in print somewhere, but I know it from talking to Penelope Gilliatt during the years 1986–1989. She interviewed and befriended Beckett in the 1970s. She often quoted this sentence of his, which she said he’d sung out during a game of pool.

3. Yosemite National Park received 3.4 million visitors in 2004; in the same year, the Grand Canyon received 4.3 million visitors. Even if most of these visitors were Americans, in a nation of 350 million, it would take 100 years for the entire population to see Yosemite and a bit less to see the Grand Canyon. Only one-half million people go to Walden Pond each year. The source of these figures are websites, namely [www.yosemitepark.com](http://www.yosemitepark.com), [www.grandcanyon.org](http://www.grandcanyon.org), and the government publication “Walden Pond, Massachusetts: Environmental Setting and Current Investigations,” available in PDF format at [ma.water.usgs.gov/publications/pdf/wal\\_66.pdf](http://ma.water.usgs.gov/publications/pdf/wal_66.pdf).

## Works Cited

- Budwig, Lisa. "Breaking Nature's Silence: Pennsylvania's Rachel Carson." *Pennsylvania Heritage* 18.4 (1992), 11–13.
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987.
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ; The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; The Pearl of Great Price*. Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1985.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem." *Collected Works*. Ed. J.C.C. Mays. Vol. 16 Part 1. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." *Collected Works*. Ed.
- Alfred R. Ferguson. Cambridge: Belknap, 1979.
- Hume, David. *Of the Standard of Taste, and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1965.
- Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Against Nature." *On Nature: Nature, Landscape, and History*. Ed. Daniel Halpern. New York: North Point, 1987. 236–43.
- Pope, Alexander. *An Essay on Man*. Ed. Maynard Mack. New Haven: Yale UP, 1951.
- Wallace, Jennifer. "Swampy's Smart Set." *Times Higher Education Supplement* 4 July 1997: 15.