Abstract

A Philosophy of Weather:  
How We Learn in an Elemental, Aesthetic Environment

LeAnn M. Holland

This dissertation investigates, through weather metaphors in nature writing, how outdoor learning can be transformative. Although we have a robust history of books, essays, and poetry about experiences in weather-rich environments, education as a theoretical and applied field still lacks a philosophical foundation upon which to improve and expand outdoor pedagogy. Rather than proposing that the hermeneutical study of weather metaphors will lead to prescriptive lessons outdoors, this research aims to reveal the philosophy of transformative learning immanent in our experiences. With an increased philosophical understanding of the aesthetically transformative dimensions of outdoor experience, when our senses are most exposed, educators may take the next step of exploring what these experiences might do for the holistic education of students. This dissertation’s recognition of the aesthetic experiences students have in weather-saturated spaces promises to generate a richer definition of an effective learning environment.
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Dedication

For My William

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A change of weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.

– Marcel Proust, “In Search of Lost Time” (1913)
“Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth, 1947, National Gallery of Art
Chapter I

Here

The inquiry at hand began years ago when I was sharing a coffee with a close friend. In mentioning my interest in the value of learning in nature, that friend told me the story of her undergraduate environmental sustainability professor Lindy B. Biggs of Emory University. Dr. Biggs opened her first lesson on the first day of that class with a challenge to her students: Think of your earliest life memory where you felt truly moved by something. After a brief pause, Dr. Biggs polled her students, asking them to raise their hand if the memory they brought to mind was something that happened outdoors (what I presume to refer to a primarily non-built, non-artificial, literally “out-of-the-door” environment). Without fail, the majority of her students raised their hands to attest to the early impact moments outdoors have on our lives. I repeat this story in my mind when I begin every new school year, every teaching assignment, and every day outdoors. Surely there must be something spectacular happening to us outside of built classrooms to provoke such memorable, transformative learning events.

Unlike various types of “change,” which happen to students incrementally, psychologists like Jack Mezirow use the term “transformation” to mark seismic learning events, or “shifts” rather than steady steps. Transformational change, then, is defined as a major alteration in the way that a person senses, perceives, or understands the world and the new internal representations of life and thought that he or she creates as a result of that seismic shift. Transformational change only happens through a process of learning, so we can comfortably presume to call any transformational change transformational learning. Transformational learning is often manifested in a person’s macro-organizational thinking about his or her culture,
societal role, aspirations, values, norms, or assumptions. This is not, however, to be confused with *transactional change*, when a person merely alters or exchanges micro-organizational facts or systemic functions, and it moves beyond *informational learning* (e.g., the “banking model” of education).¹

In this process of carefully defining terms, Mezirow introduced – with a subtle but notable switch of suffixes – a particular formulation of transformational learning known as *transformative*. According to Mezirow:

Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action.²

Within transformative learning experiences, we can have the positively focused experience of transforming *problematic* frames of reference. Unlike “transformational learning’s” generalized view of change, “transformative learning” is the experience of *growth* by shifting troublesome assumptions, maybe even opening avenues for future change. Mezirow explains how transformative learning is better than simple experience or transformational change because it makes the learner more receptive to a perspective that he or she will ultimately find to be “truer” or better “justified” in guiding future behavior.³ That is, in transformative learning, the change is eventually accepted as positive, not just change for the sake of doing something different.

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¹ Interestingly, Mezirow’s distinction between transactional and transformational learning parallels political scientist James MacGregor Burn’s discussion of different leadership styles.


³ Mezirow, 1990, 14.
According to Mezirow, the positive change or “perspective transformation” at the heart of transformative learning has three dimensions: psychological (relating to changes in self-understanding), behavioral (changes in lifestyle), or convictional (changes in beliefs). However, I add a fourth dimension to this list – the aesthetic. This fourth dimension is what the American education system so often fails to engage.

Aesthetics is the field of philosophy that studies the ways in which humans experience the world through their senses. I would add that this includes physical & mental faculties, human emotion and affect. Within aesthetics is the subfield of environmental aesthetics that concerns research relating to the spaces of aesthetic experiencing. In other words, environmental aesthetics is the field of philosophy that studies the ways in which humans experience world environments through their senses.

I focus on outdoor environments, so I will examine about the more specific subfield of outdoor aesthetics more often than the general field of environmental aesthetics. In Chapter II we discover that current research promotes embodied, otherness relations, and place as additional

4 My proposed aesthetic dimension is similar and partially inspired by Michael Polanyi’s tacit dimension.

5 Classroom educators work to assist in the transformation of students in all mental areas (psychological, behavioral, and convictional), yet Mezirow and many American philosophers of education misconstrue the arrangement by which a student always learns: necessarily through the physical senses. It may be the case that no transformation can be complete without a subsequent transformation of the student’s body, nor can any psychological, behavioral, or convictional transformation be fully realized without at least some activation of the aesthetic dimension.

6 Carlson, 1-2.

7 I question the role of place in describing aesthetic experiences in the sections on Gretel Ehrlich briefly and John Muir in detail, because it inadvertently overemphasizes landscapes or regions in experiencing, and places are imagined as bound or somehow restricted, much as the historic aesthetics of gardens or the environmental picturesque were regimented so that they could be analyzed and reproduced by followers of William Gilpin in the British Romantic Era.
qualities that go hand in hand with aesthetics in our sensual perceptive experience of outdoor
environments. Notice also that aesthetics, as I use the term here, assumes brain/mind/body
indivisibility. Thinking, judging, perceiving and feeling all coincide in aesthetic experiencing.

We have long known that experiences outdoors can be healthy, meditative, satisfy our
need for recreation or play, or give us a consciousness of place, but we cannot yet seem to
answer how it has transformative learning power. When it comes to what we are learning from
the outdoors, these experiences above all else highlight the aesthetic dimension. According to
Mezirow, these relative dimensional changes can only “stick” if the person is aware or
consciously reflecting on the improvements being made. He describes how transformative
learning is frequently the result of a “disorienting dilemma,” triggered by a major life crisis or
transition, and may even be the result of accumulated smaller transformations over time, the
learning is only solidified during the primarily rational, conscious process of coming to grips
with the experience of change.8 This is correct, but Mezirow did not address the thesis that
primary, physical and aesthetic experience is necessary before we can come to reflect. I posit that
the aesthetic dimension is crucial to transformative learning, and that like the other dimensions
that are typically considered strictly intellectual, aesthetically transformative learning experience
ought to be equally recognized, philosophized, and encouraged as the other deep (i.e.
transformative) types of learning. How might educators accomplish this? This may seem
obvious. Transport a classroom outdoors!

Unfortunately, good education is not so easy. First, effective teaching involves something

8 Mezirow, 2000, 21. He describes ten steps to transformative learning: 1. Disorienting
Explaining Options for New Behavior, 6. Building Confidence in New Ways, 7. Planning a
Reintegration.
more intentional than simply moving a class. Second, we recall the contradiction mentioned previously. It is not easy to find the time, space, support, and research justification to do even that, to move a class. Our world values human-centric progress in the form of active, concrete intellectual results, yet our experiences draw us longingly back to the outdoors. If indeed our early memorable moments are often contextualized outdoors, why do we live, eat, work, and teach predominantly indoors? Might the field of education lack attention to a pivotal learning experience of greater-than-strictly-intellectual value? In a world where the cutthroat, fast-paced life is privileged, how is it that our first transformative moments, those that are a challenge to explain and so far today from being “figured out,” can so often contradict the productivity-driven lives we adopt in adulthood? It is remarkable to me that Dr. Bigg’s students and my own have this early connection to something that is neither constructed nor controlled. This testimony says something worthwhile for early childhood through to adult education. There is a deep-seated value; our experiences are telling us that we have a primordial connection to the outdoors.

I can see that humans have a connection to the outdoors, but that still does not answer why the outdoors is so educationally transformative. Again, Mezirow’s dimensions might offer a way to explain what I am noticing. Learning experiences outdoors can spark psychological, behavioral, convictional, and aesthetic transformation. Moreover, because learning experiences outdoors can be multi-dimensionally transformative, the outdoor environment stands the chance of being one of the few spaces that can change a person entirely, mind and body: The outdoors can holistically educate. Outdoor learning is memorable to us, because it offers an exception to the field of philosophy of education’s historical tendency to focus on the intellectual mind alone.

This dissertation proposes that substantive evidence that outdoor learning can transform aesthetically, and quite possibly holistically, saturates historical nature writings. The trouble is
that we are conditioned to dismiss nature writing like that of Henry David Thoreau, Mary Oliver, Annie Dillard, or John Muir as beautiful but only anecdotal renderings of nature. Herein I take another look at classic travel monologues, nature poetry, and aesthetic descriptions of experiences in nature and see them instead as robust, trustworthy evidence that an aesthetically or holistically transformative experience can and does occur outdoors.

Further Clarification on Transformative Learning

Theorist of andragogy Peter Willis notices that transformative learning theory over recent years has developed two distinct approaches. The first is transformative learning that is the outcome of critical thinking (a la Mezirow). The second is transformative learning acquired by non-rational thought. It is this second approach led by researchers like John M. Dirkx that I find most promising. According to Dirkx, transformative learning could just as accurately be labeled “soul work.” Calling upon famous psychologist Carl Jung’s theory of the conscious and unconscious mind indicating whole psychological development, Dirkx considers both rational and non-rational work done on the soul (his holistic term for the human self – run by the conscious ego but also allowing non-surface meaning-making) as integral. But it is Dirkx’s excessive talk of “ego” that has adult learning theorist Stephen D. Brookfield desiring a public model of transformative learning. Brookfield reasons that no transformative experience can be entirely egocentric because all experience is laden with socio-political undertones. That is, no

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9 Willis, 212.
transformative learning experience will be only for the benefit or growth or narrative of the singular inner self. All transformations involve the social world and our representations of it.

M. Carolyn Clark argues that transformative learning can just as likely involve non-cognitive ways of knowing. One’s learning might skip the cognitive thinking step that Mezirow touts, instead manifesting itself directly within the knowledge of our bodies, and she means bodies to be the brain or mind and corporeal physical self as one whole unit. According to the theory of ways of knowing, all learning is embodied knowing, meaning that knowledge stems from what has been sensed and taken in – learned – literally, by the body that includes the brain. Only in and through our neurological (and thereby cognitive), sensory, affective bodies can we rationally reflect on that experience, but not before some episode of physical processing.

Clark is describing, essentially, Dewey’s distinction between secondary and primary experiencing, respectively. In education we often get carried away theorizing the intellectual, cognitive activities of learning while failing to honor the primary experiences upon which those secondary experiences are founded. Learning is a reciprocal relationship not of mind and body as if those functioning roles of the same single unit were separate (which they are not) but of the oscillating primary and secondary experiences of one mind/body system. By storing knowledge in the body, imprinted on fingertips after touching a stove that is too hot, and formed into files of synapses in the brain, learners keep an essential continuum of experiences that in the language of Dewey live fruitfully in future experiences.

\[10\] Brookfield, 132.

\[11\] Clark, 426-427. I use mind or brain interchangeably, often choosing in this research to call this single embodied unit as the “mind/body,” using the slash to indicate holism rather than dualism.

Psychologist David Kolb identifies a common thread of learning as an inherently tension- and conflict-filled process in the philosophies of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Jean Piaget and Lewinian models in psychology.\(^\text{13}\) Rather than say that transformative learning happens through an innate process, Kolb suggests that a successful learner needs four types of abilities in order to fully transform: the ability to experience concretely, the ability to reflectively observe, the ability to form abstract conceptualizations, and the ability to actively experiment.\(^\text{14}\)

By conceiving a multi-ability approach to transformative learning, the experiential aspect of learning is more wholly developed in Kolb’s theory. Kolb requires the learner to do more than see and live the transformative experience; he or she must physically and mentally embody the experience. For Kolb, all learning is experiential, and knowledge is created only by the transformation of human experience.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore, it is not the transformation itself that is key, but the interaction and transactional relationship between humans and their environment – the transformation of the experience – that commands learning. John Dewey says this well in *Art as Experience* (1934):

> Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living...Oftentimes, however, the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into an experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plough and turn back; we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated but because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy. In contrast with such experience, we have an experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it

\(^{13}\) Kolb, 30.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 38.
integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience.  

In this passage, Dewey is distinguishing the “general stream” of everyday experience, which cannot be subsumed into any sort of complete idea from the times that we can recognize ourselves as having an experience, a type of experience that we can “integrate” and “demarcate” in our memories. I see this as the difference between moving about our lives without making note of anything new, and those moments that we can distinctly remember learning something. This can be identified in Kolb’s idea that transformative learning is about transforming the type of experience itself into that which is an experience, an event in life that ends in a feeling of consummation.

Another Deweyan scholar, Philip Jackson, gives us perhaps the most well known philosophical discussion of transformation in his 1986 book The Practice of Teaching. Jackson notices as Mezirow does a few years later, two significant categories of learning in developmental psychology. But rather than apply them to development theory, Jackson sees them as varying traditions of pedagogy. He names these traditions the mimetic and the transformative. We can already see the precursors to the transactional versus transformative polarity mentioned in the previous section. Jackson’s label mimetic comes directly from the Greek word “mimesis,” meaning imitative, like a mime mirroring the moves of her partner. The mimetic tradition stresses the importance of pedagogical method, the actual mirroring or

16 Dewey, Art as Experience, 554.
imitative act that the student uses to learn, what technique the teacher employs, to pass on the information. Knowledge in the mimetic tradition is presented rather than discovered, which means that the origin of knowledge is always the teacher or the one making use of mimetic transmission.\textsuperscript{17}

In contrast, Jackson’s transformative tradition of education is all about discovery. The teacher need not be the source of knowledge; often, it is unclear where in reality knowledge originates.\textsuperscript{18} Transformative education might demand confusion, risk, spirituality, or metamorphosis. As Plato in the Republic describes in Book X, mimesis becomes secondary when we reason that knowledge can come from a more primary source. The transformative process, on the other hand, is less prescriptive, more about modeling persuasion rather than compliance, and use of open-ended narrative.\textsuperscript{19} Of course, there are problems with the transformative pedagogical tradition as well: it can be seen as pretentious (a student needs to be completely transformed by education), few teachers want to admit to doing this to their students (transformation implies great responsibility and power), and the methodology is vague.\textsuperscript{20}

Jackson concludes that both pedagogical traditions are necessary and are rarely as detached from each other as they might immediately appear. I agree that artful teaching involves both in turn. Yet, the elusive character of transformative pedagogy makes it especially challenging to study. How and why does it happen? How do we philosophize something that is in essence defined by its subtlety?

\textsuperscript{17} Jackson, 117.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 120-122.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 124-125. See also Clark on narrative usage, 435-437.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 128-129.
Although her article is meant to be an exposition of the issues present when therapy is prescribed by education,\(^{21}\) Aislinn O’Donnell adds an excellent section entitled “Unpredictable Pedagogical Encounters.” Here O’Donnell promotes pedagogical opportunity for unpredictable therapeutic encounters in lieu of forcing students to be exposed in the present. That is, teachers cannot impose transformation upon students in a particular time and space. O’Donnell uses philosophical study and dialogue in prison settings as an example of how some students are moved to transform, while others are not. She explains that some students may require support in order to incorporate a learning moment into their conscious experience or “work through it” further.\(^{22}\) She suspects that at times these moments can simply be too much for students to handle alone. Students and teachers alike face these transformations. There are some events that we may never be able to apprehend. In this light, O’Donnell characterizes learning as “an unending and open-ended pedagogical dynamic through a shared love of, and interest in, subject matter.”\(^{23}\) Where does this leave educators? Is there anything that we can grasp for certain about transformative learning?

O’Donnell’s answer lies in the “atmosphere” of feeling.\(^{24}\) Unlike Mezirow, O’Donnell argues that the only pedagogical element we can control is the creation of a learning atmosphere or space to move in; we cannot control student rationalizations.\(^{25}\) While one part of the educator’s job may be to exercise *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, by recognizing teachable,  

\(^{21}\) Jackson also finds that therapy has significant crossovers with pedagogy, 129.  
\(^{22}\) O’Donnell, 277.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 278.  
\(^{24}\) More shall be said on atmospheres of emotion in Chapter II. See also Griffero.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 278.
insightful, unpredictable events on the cusp of learning, stepping in to support and encourage that student to a transformative state, this may all happen in such a fleeting way that the educator cannot possibly detect the shifting winds of change. Here she falls back on Dewey’s language of “undergoing” (the act of doing or experiencing something) as better than interventional methods of teaching. Practical wisdom in the moment is the best possible action. No single, all-purpose model of pedagogy will do.

Perhaps the unpredictable pedagogical space that O’Donnell promotes leads us further into an examination of whether the term “transformative learning” can be pinned down at all. Michael Newman argues that we should abandon the name transformative learning for the more straightforward and colloquial designator “good learning.” Giving learning a positive value rather than a nebulous state allows Newman to break down nine characteristics.  

Although I appreciate Newman’s attempt to make pedagogy more clear and concise, there is much more to transformative learning than merely “good learning.” We struggle to understand this concept because it is worthy of struggle. The encapsulation of human learning in profound events or moments is more than can be described with a basic value adjective. In much of what follows, I explore ways of supporting the idea of transformative learning, rather than viewing it either as an unassailable model from educational theory or as a clearly impractical ideal for educational practice.

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26 Newman, 51. The nine characteristics are: instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate, and moral. In different acts of learning different aspects will dominate, but when all nine are present we will have, with all the ambiguity the word implies, good learning.
A Map of the Research

This dissertation research follows a standard form: introduction, literature review, methods, data, analysis, and conclusion. However, within each chapter is an important element of the bigger philosophical picture, the argument for a modern philosophy of learning in weather. Here I will sketch a map of the chapters, pointing out the major element in each. First, in this chapter, the “Here” from the “Here and Now,” one should see that this has been a project long in the making for me. Although Mezirow and Dr. Biggs demonstrate the general reasons for my interest in investigating aesthetic experiences in weather-rich environments, they do not explain the actual methods and basis for the research as it is presented here. As such, consider this chapter a mere outline of what is to come, a teaser of the issues present, and the considerations that led me to propose the importance of this work.

My reader will notice the unusual choice of introductory and concluding chapter titles, so the purpose should be made promptly evident. In the chapters “Here” and “Now” I establish what I believe Edward Mooney would consider a “philosophy of presence.” Chapter I, “Here,” is intended to set the scene, not as a place for learning but instead an environment for learning to be heard, like a voice echoing in a vast space. I describe the setting of this type of learning, identify its role in outdoor experience, and then complete the study with a conversation of the temporal reality of our time on Earth, what might promise positive change, and what we might introduce in the now, drawing the present setting “here” to the present time “now.”

A study of nature writing to extract the presence of philosophical learning requires a clear idea of the power of the aesthetics, both aesthetic experience and language like metaphors that describe aesthetic experiencing. An aesthetic experience is essentially an embodied experience.

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27 Mooney, 2016, 63.
It does not require material beyond that of ordinary life; even the smallest moments (“spots of time,” William Wordsworth called them) can be aesthetic and potentially transformative. Aesthetic experiences happen when the student increases attentiveness toward his or her body during primary experiencing, so in this way, the experiencing itself is qualitatively different because it is also infused with secondary experiencing. The activation of our faculties and functions generates an experience, according to Dewey.\(^\text{28}\) That is, we form a memorable moment, a consummate experience of the mind/body operating as it always does, but with the added aspect of constructive growth, also known as learning. Aesthetic experiencing, therefore, can lead to aesthetic learning. Chapter II elaborates upon the role of aesthetics in learning outdoors through a review of the research literature.

Chapter III introduces the reasons behind this dissertation’s utilization of metaphorical language and weather talk in nature writings. Instead of viewing writing about aesthetic experiencing as nothing more than an expression of feeling, artistic and fascinating, but illogical (in the sense that it is overly emotional), I take it as a principal communicative mode by which outdoorspeople can convey their embodied experience outdoors. I have spent hours pondering what inspires so many people to through-hike thousands of miles on the trail, living months to years outdoors, often postponing, supplementing, or even rejecting classic educational choices like a college degree. Along the Appalachian Trail in Massachusetts, there is a rock with this inscription by Thoreau that notes this inclination. It reads, “It were as well to be educated in the shadow of a mountain as in more classic shade. Some will remember, no doubt, not only that they went to college, but that they went to the mountain.” In some ways, I am one who went to the mountain too, but the mystery of how and what I am learning still remains. What makes my

\(^{28}\) Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 554. Also described in Dewey’s *Experience and Nature*, Chapter I.
time outdoors so different from my time indoors? When I have stood at the edge of a cliff on a windy day, felt the icy air creep into my nose on a frosty morning, or fallen asleep fascinated by the loud and rhythmic sounds of crickets or whippoorwills, I have often thought of the struggle I would face in describing what I had learned from those sensations. For something so ineffable as trying to share the experience of how one feels in one’s own body in the natural environment, nature writers are able to accomplish quite a lot. We need only to recognize their efforts as serious and intentional.

A key example that comes to mind of the under-appreciation of aesthetic nature writing as indicative of transformative learning is the dismissal of “weather talk,” or metaphors of the weather added into a conversation, as banal. For example, when a person says that the weather is “gloomy” or “moody” today, he or she is making a statement about how the environment makes them feel. It is more than a conversational quip – it is the aesthetic affect of the environment on a person. It is the manifestation of a person’s learned relationship with the non-human world. We use what words we have to bring our aesthetic experience to life. Likewise, we talk about our “sunny” dispositions as if we are the gigantic, flaming sun itself, or talk of hard-to-read people as “cold,” like frigid weather in winter.

Before I returned to school to work on this dissertation, I was a sixth grade Language Arts Teacher on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in Mission, South Dakota. Mahpiya (mah-gheppee-yah) meaning “cloud or sky” in Lakota was the first or middle name of many of my female students. I was struck by the prevalence of names like Mahpiya that related to weather, animals, or experiences outdoors. Although it is certainly a lovely sounding name, it is popular because it means something to them. The weather words to Lakota people are constant, present metaphors for life. Listening to and teaching Lakota folklore that was laced with representations
of nature and metaphor, I learned to see that certain words bear testimony to aesthetic experience. If aesthetic experience is embodied, then aesthetic language like metaphor is the expression of bodily experience on paper.

Aesthetic language is used on purpose, because no other type of explanation, gestural or linguistic, can suffice. Plain talk (analytic phrasing, without aesthetic languages like poetry or metaphor) cannot hold the same feeling, weight, or illustrative value. Thus, just as Hegel noticed that Persian art uses repeated geometric shapes to symbolize the sacred concept of infinity, so too does poetic or aesthetic language signify something otherwise indescribable about our learning experiences in the outdoors.

This dissertation project investigates selections from naturalist accounts that exercise weather metaphor to determine in what way their words might reveal an aesthetic learning experience outdoors otherwise unaddressed in philosophy of education research. Chapter IV explains the methodological details of environmental hermeneutics, some of the decisions that were made in advance of the project launch, and clarifications to keep in mind while contemplating the nature writers’ discourses on transformative aesthetic learning experiences in following chapters, V and VI.

I expect that the fifth and sixth chapters may be the most rewarding and the most challenging of this research to process, because there are more observations and questions in this data set than there are answers. But I am reminded that this alone is not a problem, given the subject matter and the abstraction of experience, as we have learned from Dewey, which exists implicitly in these learning moments. With each nature writer’s text sampled, I have gone through the work of highlighting, dictating to paper, considering, questioning, and interpreting their words in light of what appear to be their samples of outdoor aesthetic experience. As you
will see, and as I suspected in advance of this work, much of what I discover overlaps the common use of “weather talk.” But the thesis does not stop there, of course. I probe each quote to see what it might reveal to us about an experienced outdoorsman or woman’s experience of truly learning in a weather-saturated environment. What caused their interest? What did they learn? What can they replicate of that moment, if anything?

Included throughout this chapter with the seven principal texts are a collection of my personal memories and journal entries captured while reading the primary sources. I include them, not to bias my research, but rather to pay tribute to the personal spirit of this work. The data set is, after all, a collection of personal memories from other outdoorspeople, broken open and exposed to all our readers. Sharing my own thoughts is both an attempt to give thanks for their openness by exchanging some of my own private experience, and it is also opposes the stance that what is personal or subjective is automatically unfit for research. Actually, according to the hermeneutical principles upon which my research methodology is based, my subjectivity is not a problematic bias, but an expert’s strength in properly “hearing out” the nature writers’ own tales. In our similar, collected experiences perhaps we can draw out some measure of normativity upon which an educational theory might be founded. That is, at least, the point of my inclusion of the vignettes and photographs you will discover within these pages. Chapter VI is a continuation of this process and an accumulative drawing-out of the important notes and arguments that the nature writers appear to be making. Here I use the data to inform my own philosophical sensibilities and outline what might be seen as the result of aesthetic outdoor learning experiences, which is a better pedagogical understanding of learning in different environments.
The dissertation is concluded in Chapter VII, where I explain what we might now expect from future research on weather-rich learning. This is also where I evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the research that has been presented, with an eye to how we, as educators, can see a new tomorrow with a greater knowledge of that which makes learning truly meaningful and holistically transformative, such as an environment that is rich in weather. With this, I take the argument one step further to acknowledge the ethical, eco-justice, and climate-change educational ramifications of re-envisioning a learning environment as a pedagogical choice.

One might assume, given its emphasis on the outdoors, that this study ought to begin by clarifying the difference between what is indoors versus outdoors (or to distinguish human nature from environmental nature), but the aesthetic experience I elucidate resists binaries. In offering a more complete philosophical picture of learning outdoors, I find that the differences are superficial, or that it is misleading to dichotomize the outdoors versus the indoors as American educators do. Rather, it is my greatest hope that this research will posit the viable theory that our choice of classroom environment falls on a range scale of options from an artificial, lab-like space to a weather-saturated space.
Chapter II

Qualities of Transformative Learning Experience Outdoors

In my introductory chapter, I posited that there is an aesthetic dimension to transformative learning outdoors, but this is not the terminology other researchers in the field have adopted. In this chapter, I explore published literature that relates to this idea. Specifically, I investigate what research has shown is educationally transformative about our experiences outdoors.

This chapter is a review of the literature on transformative learning from psychology, philosophy of education, classical philosophy, and aesthetic philosophy. I argue that except for one emerging area in philosophy called “elemental philosophy,” which is addressed in depth in the last section of this chapter, nature writing, poetry, and art are the genres that have come the closest to characterizing the distinctive learning experience that appears to frequently happen when outdoors, exposed to the weather. The research on aesthetics being expressed through literary devices and poetry launches my increased focus on metaphor and language in the following chapter.

General Responses

Immediately, some popular studies come to mind.29 Research on the “benefits” of the

29 One should note that none of these studies uses the term “nature” as its primary construct. This omission is likely due to the incredible challenge we have today with defining this term. See Christina M. Gschwandter, 82-99, and W. S. K. Cameron, 102-120, for an elaboration of the complicated history of this word. For this reason, I avoid relying on “nature” as a concept in my
outdoors is circulated online to support non-profit organizations and initiatives aimed at outdoor education. For example, in 2012 the Children and Nature Network, a famous non-profit organization, published a 46-page report that compiles research from multiple disciplines. The studies listed show a wide range of reasons for why nature is beneficial. Coming from the outdoor education community, I can attest that many of these findings are already widely accepted as fact. For instance, a British study cited by the Children and Nature Network compared reported emotions and attention/concentration between subjects completing an activity in a natural versus a human-made environment and found that the natural environment correlates to reduced negative emotions. This research and similar studies have inspired a new field of environmental architecture called biophilic design (building green space into human-made environments). Similarly, author Richard Louv wrote two nonfiction books titled Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder and The Nature Principle, each filled to the brim with studies akin to those collected by the Children and Nature Network.

In 2004, Stacy Taniguchi wrote her Educational Leadership and Foundations dissertation as an answer to what makes for meaningful learning outdoors. Grounding the theory of her study in John Dewey’s definition of meaningful learning as, roughly, reflective experiences, she followed thirteen students during a semester-long Wilderness Writing Program. She qualitatively compiled the students’ journal entries from trips outdoors and concluded that there was a pattern across the students’ entries. Learning outdoors happened through the process of students feeling

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research, instead choosing the more direct term “outdoors” as anything that is predominantly non-indoors and non-artificial. I reiterate this explicit choice frequently in my dissertation. The only exceptions to this rule are my use of “nature writing” to refer directly to the formal literary genre and my Chapter VI analysis of Wordsworth on Nature.

30 Charles and Loje, 3-4.
awkward, then something akin to *sublimation*\(^{31}\) (which she considers a purification of sorts\(^{32}\)), and lastly, experiencing a reflective group reconstruction of their perspectives. Sublimation sounds strikingly like the process of transformation I elaborated upon in the previous chapter.

Laura Galen D’Amato and Marianne Krasny published a comparable study in the *Journal of Environmental Education*, 2011. They conducted 30-90 minute interviews with 23 participants of an outdoor adventure education program (e.g., Outward Bound or National Outdoor Leadership School). Their qualitative interview results indicated that participants experiencing personal transformations attributed those transformations to the following factors: separation from normal life during the course, extended time spent outdoors, the community of course participants, and the intensity and challenge of the course.\(^{33}\) Of these attributes, only one in particular addresses the outdoor environment directly, but that is not to say whether it is more or less important than the other factors, or what precisely the philosophical impact is of the outdoor environment. It proves only that a correlation between transformative learning and the outdoors is possible.

As close as the popular education and environmental studies are to demonstrating that the outdoors is a unique environment, the research lacks philosophical foundations. This philosophical literature gap means that we must probe the specialized field of philosophy of education research on the outdoors, which centers on four primary responses to the question of what is transformative about outdoor experience. These responses argue that outdoor learning is *embodied*, cued into an awareness of *otherness*, about finding a *place*, or an amalgamation of

\(^{31}\) Note the shared etymology of sublimation with the Kantian sublime.

\(^{32}\) Taniguchi, 93.

\(^{33}\) D’Amato and Krasny, 242-247.
these factors due to being peculiarly aesthetic (which I argue implies an aesthetic dimension of transformative learning outdoors).

Responses from Philosophy and Education

Outdoor Learning is Embodied

Michael Bonnett implores educators to recognize that “human nature” and our indissoluble relationship with the organization of non-human nature (the environment around us) is a crucial foundation for pedagogical conversations. Identifying four ways in which educators use the word nature, Bonnett concluded that we might think of nature most completely as a “self-arising.” In 2008 Ruyu Hung continued in this naturalizing spirit, invoking Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and “ecophilia” to claim that loving nature is a matter of self-love and world-love, because both the natural self and nature that is other than ourselves must be acknowledged at the same time. Being corporeal is the very condition by which our natural reason meets with our natural physicality in the world. Thus, like Merleau-Ponty, Hung argues that we cannot conceive of learning at all without subsuming the idea of being a body in the world, or the “Flesh of the World.”

Charles Brown and Ted Toadvine coined the term “eco-phenomenology.” Eco-phenomenology is based on the twofold claim that (1) an adequate account of ecology requires the methods and insights of phenomenology and (2) phenomenology is a study of the interrelationship between organism and world in its metaphysical and axiological dimensions. Their thinking is that if we bring to light a perspective on the world as intricately entwined with

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34 Brown and Toadvine, xii-xiii.
the human body’s presence in that world, then many of the philosophical disparities left by the environmental nature versus human nature debate are resolved.

Embodiment, a vital aspect of eco-phenomenology, implies a focus on experience. In the introduction to their edited volume Brown and Toadvine explain, “Phenomenology takes its starting point in a return to the ‘things’ or ‘matters’ themselves, that is, the world as we experience it. In other words, for phenomenologists, experience must be treated as the starting point and ultimate court of appeal for all philosophical evidence.”35 However, eco-phenomenology is not the only route that philosophers of education have taken to explain the benefits of the outdoors.

Some philosophers stress that the term “embodiment,” even without a commitment to phenomenology, has the necessary pedagogical weight. For example, Clarence Joldersma promotes a “radical embodiment model” of education: a framework that understands brain development and neuroscience as completely “enmeshed in sensorimotor dynamisms, even if there is no overt sensorimotor activity.”36 While standard notions of embodiment recognize brain activity as both mental and physical, radical embodiment additionally requires the broader understanding that the environment that interacts with the human body is equally essential. Therefore, a pedagogy based on radical embodiment would acknowledge the body and environment’s continued involvement in learning even the most abstract academic subjects.

35 Ibid., x.

36 Joldersma, 268.
Outdoor Learning is About Place

Most recently, the phenomenological conversation of nature and embodiment has evolved to a discussion of what, specifically, is this “other” environment. Most of the research on philosophy of education in the outdoors focuses on an orientation toward where we educate as fundamental in what students learn. This orientation is termed “placefulness.” Huey-li Li, Chris Moffett, Robbie Nicol, Andrew Stables, Jan Masschelein, David A. Greenwood, John Kitchens, Alun David Morgan, Hung and Bonnett, have each made marked contributions in this area.

Similarly, all of twentieth-century Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore’s classes were modeled after the indigenous tapoban or “forest school,” which meant that they were intentionally held outdoors. He believed that full cultivation of the senses in youth would never happen, nor would education be balanced on a world-view, unless they were exercised in a place that allowed child “improvisation without the constant imposition of the ready-made.”

O’Connell deferentially describes Tagore’s educational paradigm as,

Likening the subconscious mind to a tree that absorbs its nutrients from the surrounding atmosphere… The starting points were the local environment and the natural world. With these in mind, Tagore formulated a curriculum that would revolve organically around nature, with classes held in the open air under the trees, providing for an unstructured appreciation of the plant and animal kingdoms and seasonal change.

For Tagore, it was as if students’ minds were soaking up the “nutrients” of their classroom environment. But like vitamins and minerals for our bodies, impure ingredients alongside natural nutrients, foreign substances that are present because of human alteration to their structure or product tampering, might just as easily harm. He intended the classroom environment to be free

37 O’Connell, 131.
38 Ibid.,133.
of any unnecessary or physically imposed constraints. In essence, he hoped by modeling the tapoban to use only the “organic” aspects of the environment.39

**Outdoor Learning is Awareness of Otherness**

Bonnett and Hung’s articles also share the common theme of embodiment implying “otherness.” After all, if I am to accept my natural body, I must presume everything outside of my body is “other-than-me” or not I. This is an ancient philosophy that dates back to tantric Buddhism. Recognition of my natural embodiment requires recognition of nature.40 However, Mauro Grün clarifies that this merely a distinction, not a dichotomy. Grün believes one common problem philosophy has adopted from Cartesian-Newtonian assumptions is the dualistic attitude toward nature. “Nature” is treated as if it is a wholly different object apart from human beings. To de-objectify nature, Grün calls upon Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Gadamer found that ancient Greek language expressed a sense of things retaining a certain air of dignity. Nature, another “thing” in language, does not bend for our thought. Our thought, Grün says, “suffers nature.”41 Consequently, nature is not an object for us to project upon and alter but a mysterious and informative other for us to meet and appreciate as integral to our selves. Nature as an object may be fundamentally disrespected without moral retribution. However, nature as “an other” garners our respect.

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39 Whereas all of the other aspects of current research on outdoor learning apply readily to the theory I outline in this dissertation (i.e., embodiment, awareness of otherness, and aesthetics), there are several issues with place as a central concept for philosophy of education that I will return to in my Chapter VI discussion of John Muir.

40 This is also Sallis’s thesis in The Return of Nature.

41 Grün, 163.
Shortly after these philosophers launched discussions in the field of philosophy of education about nature as otherness, Australian scholar John Quay published a 2013 article in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* arguing that self, others, and environment, the three most commonly identified elements in phenomenology, over-simplify our pedagogical goals. Outdoor education should be more than activities to recognize otherness, he suggested. It should actively teach ways of being in the world. Nathan Bell poses a similar argument by quoting Ricoeur’s ethics of the self as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others in just institutions.”

Bell adapts Ricoeur’s Good Life for environmental ethics to be a life wherein the student develops the ethical responsibility of being with and for others; that is, identifying oneself with the shared environment in which we must all live.

Then there is the interpretation of otherness as “other than one’s own identity,” or thinking *apart from* the self, of which Jan Masschelein’s work is a notable example. Although it does not focus on the outdoors per se, his pioneering research on the educative experience of the *flaneur*, the 18th-century French tradition of wandering and experiencing city streets, subconsciously breathing in the fashion, industry, reverie, or adventure of the journey, does theorize how students encounter otherness in a non-classroom environment. Masschelein tells us that when walking, students can become “consciously aware” of and “attentive” to the inescapable reality of living. The idea is for the student to step, literally, outside of one’s self and into another’s world. He titles this method of teaching a “poor pedagogy,” because it does not require more method and planning but less. A poor pedagogy leaves the curriculum open-ended, like the meandering pathways we walk, free at any time for a learning transformation.

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42 Bell, 142.

43 Masschelein, 2010, 44.
The student is expected to notice in others—other things and people passed—new ideas and new information.

**Outdoor Learning is Aesthetic**

After revisiting the above research, I am struck yet again by John Quay’s argument that all of the eco-phenomenological talk of self, others, and nature lacks a distinction between whether those parts are part of a “simple versus a total whole.” By this Quay means that the research that talks about interconnectivity cannot adequately account for the variety of experiences students have with their being in the world.\(^44\) Dewey, he points out, calls this distinction aesthetic versus reflective experience.\(^45\) The aesthetic experience is one wherein a student is submerged in a state of simply being. For Quay, the aesthetic experience is the very definition of outdoor learning. Like Quay, Richard Shusterman believes that aesthetic experience is key, but he worries that even those educators that strive to provoke student aesthetic experience can take the body for granted. His term *somaesthetics* acts as a reminder that, in aesthetic experience, the body is the “locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning.”\(^46\) I presume that all aesthetic experience is somaesthetic experience.


\(^44\) Quay, 143.

\(^45\) Ibid., 149.

\(^46\) Shusterman, 2.
Buell introduces Thoreau’s nature writings as more than enchanting nonfiction. He sees Thoreau’s book as a creative undertaking in order to imagine a more “ecocentric” world. Herein I think we have found the closest project yet to the central question of my research. In re-reading the classic nature writers as innovative environmental philosophers, Buell is commanding that we subsequently utilize their ideas to re-imagine the modern relationship between mankind and non-human nature. Buell’s research, therefore, merges many of the ideas of this literature review (otherness, embodiment, etc.).

Although he did not underline the value of his research for curriculum and instruction, Buell discovered a unique link (perhaps the link) between transformative learning theory and the outdoors: aesthetic philosophy. And his research draws us closer to the fire. For all the brilliant scholarly writing over recent years, we still land desperately far away from being able to characterize transformative learning outdoors with any definitiveness. The unsung heroes of environmental hermeneutics, nature writers and poets like Thoreau, John Muir, or Wordsworth, have already added to philosophical theory. The gap in research is instigated only by our typical distraction of analyzing nature writers’ work as creative renderings rather than seeking to illuminate their pedagogical undercurrents.

Jeffrey Wattles published a 2013 article in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* that is an example this research on the rise, entitled “John Muir as a Guide to Education in Environmental Aesthetics.” Although Wattles teaches his article’s content to art students only, the nuggets for philosophers of education shine brightly throughout. Wattles writes: “Muir did discover one of the missing pieces in the contemporary philosophy of what it means to be human, though he did not state it as a philosopher would. ‘I think that one of the properties of that compound which we
call man is that when exposed to the rays of mountain beauty it glows with joy."\[^{47}\]

Also buried far from our primary field in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 1998, Holmes Rolston III published an enlightening piece on the aesthetic experience of forests, insisting that aesthetic experience does something for a student that studying the science of trees cannot. “Science, however necessary, is never sufficient,” Rolston argues, “Forests must be encountered. Forests are constructed by nature, and science teaches us how that is so. Yet forests by nature contain no aesthetic experience; that has to be constructed as we humans arrive. Knowledge of the forest as an objective community does not guarantee the full round of aesthetic experience, not until one moves into that community oneself.”\[^{48}\] Who does Rolston cite as the source of these ideas about the learning value of forests? Why, none other than our friends Muir, Wordsworth, and Thoreau.

To some extent, researchers have discovered that the answer to this inquiry can be constructed by appealing to unruly aesthetic concepts such as the sublime, awe, unpredictability, corporeal vulnerability, *aporia*, epiphany, etc.\[^{49}\] One well-known example is Immanuel Kant’s version of the sublime in nature from his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Basically, there are three phases of an aesthetic judgment of the Kantian sublime: (1) identification or apprehension of something sublime in nature, (2) rupturing of the human imagination and subsequent

\[^{47}\] Wattles, 70.

\[^{48}\] Rolston, 161.

discomfort as we struggle to comprehend when we are experiencing, and (3) a pleasurable feeling as we reason is restored to us and we transcend the experience of nature.\footnote{Kant identifies two types of sublime, the mathematical and the dynamically sublime. I focus on the dynamically sublime only, as that it the one Kant eventually connects to aesthetic education and morality.}

Unlike beauty, Kant observes there are no objects of the sublime; it is formless, meaning that it is only through our perception that the sublime \textit{appears} to be an object (this is called subreption). Kant also observes that an experience of the sublime can be both pleasurable and unpleasant, which he calls its contrapurposive quality. In a sublime experience our faculties at first seem to have failed, and we clearly see our cognitive limits, especially the limits of our imagination because we cannot imagine how or why something so sublime can and does exist. However, in actuality, our human faculties are only stretched by the sublime. This seems to us to be contrary, or “contra,” to our human interests, or “purposiveness,” in that it reveals a human struggle to regain a sense of rational order about the world. It is counter to our human interests to feel limited or restricted. Fortunately for mankind, Kant solves this uncomfortable issue by concluding that the human faculty of Reason is a supersensible faculty. This means that despite temporary challenges, the experiencer will eventually come to realize once again that she has ideas that are even more incredible than the baffling sublime in Nature (for example, humans can rationally conceptualize big ideas like the absolute or infinity).

There are three defining features of Kant’s philosophy of aesthetic judgments of the sublime. First, Kant says that our judgments of the sublime are purely \textit{disinterested}, because the sublime is not something that humans can make or bend to our purposes. As such, we can openly judge the sublime from a position of relative neutrality. Second, aesthetic judgments of the sublime are \textit{purposive without a purpose} (contrapurposive too). Purposive without a purpose
describes how humans can subsume Nature under our faculty of Reason, but Nature is not something we can put to use. The sublime, then, is an end in itself, and we approach it open-mindedly, without any interest in putting it to our devices or having any “intentions for it”. Our approach to sublime judgments, then, must come from a position of disinterestedness. Third, aesthetic judgments of the sublime are universally valid, or express universality. By this Kant means that when judging the sublime in nature, humans can still recognize that other humans are capable of having this same sort of sublime experience, sublime judgment, because other humans also possess the faculty of Reason. And yet again, this third feature (universal validity) can exist only if we assume the position of disinterestedness.

Emily Brady clearly explains that experience of the sublime is an educative experience, thus planting it firmly in philosophy of education’s ballpark. Typically the default goal of aesthetic education is greater aesthetic sensibility in the form of aesthetic appreciation, but I believe there is more we can aspire to teach. In philosophical contrast, I would say that origins of the sublime do exist beyond our mental representations; however, I agree with Kant that these origins are not simply objects in the world. By this perspective (the view that there is a sublime source outside of our subjective selves), I allow that what we judge to be sublime, like the weather, is somewhat independent of us.

Unlike Kant, I posit that the weather is purposive with a purpose. However, the purpose of something sublime is distinctly non-human. This is why I believe non-human nature holds inherent knowledge that we can learn but cannot control or mold to our purposes. Kant would say that we cannot know these “objects” of the sublime, but I suggest that we can come close to

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51 Brady, 35-39.

52 Carlson, 21. See also Brady, 6-9.
it and that we are compelled to seek their knowledge, we just cannot subsume the information that we learn to any familiar logical structure, so it appears as if it does not have reason at all. I argue that this is a common egotistical error, one that Kant and Wordsworth famously make but new-age thinkers like Dillard appear to resist. This is a vital difference in aesthetic philosophies, because it means that for my research, aesthetic education can be more than an act of teaching for taste or appreciation of non-human nature. It means that non-human nature holds value and knowledge in and of itself and implies that we might be able to teach our selves or others how to learn from these non-human sources of value and knowledge.

Philosophers of education who focus on theorizing outdoor learning also choose to coin their own terms instead of adopting historical concepts like the Kantian sublime (i.e., eco-phenomenology, embodied cognition, experiential learning or education, placefulness, etc). But none of these concepts alone (as it is currently defined) adequately examines or mollifies my query's demands. We see that the problem is either that the transformative language has not been applied to outdoor experience, or that outdoor research has not philosophized its transformative promise.

53 See also Hitt and my Chapter VI Wordsworth discussion of spots of time.

54 Due to the proliferation and conflation of these many terms, I select precision over convenience by generalizing the subject of my research to its applicable adjectives and nouns. This results in an awkwardly wordy but semantically accurate and broad search for what I shall call “transformative learning experience in weather-rich environments.” I note this again in my philosophical methods, Chapter IV.
The Need for an Aesthetic Philosophy of Weather

Sallis, Tagore, Masschelein, Wattles, Buell, and Rolston have all launched projects that intimate to some extent the transformative outdoor learning experience, attempting in bits and pieces to draw together the concerns of my research. However, with any project researching a possible aesthetically transformative dimension, one of the greatest challenges is collecting the data. The options are either to experience it for one’s self, or to trust the narratives of others. Aesthetic experiences outdoors may become transformative, but how will we identify the evidence? Since I have already done much of the former, what remains is a look at how aesthetic experience in the outdoors can be researched through conventional use of language.

Art. The beginning of this chapter dedicated a portion of discussion to the distinction (but not dichotomy) between aesthetics of art and that of the natural environment. I have already shifted the central topic to that of Nature. Unfortunately, this will not do as a modern subject because of the significant definitional rifts and confusion that surrounds this term in the academic world of environmental philosophy (and in fact, in our ordinary understanding of nature). After all, what is nature? Is it human nature, or anything natural? Are lab-created food products that perfectly match the molecular structure of the originals, natural? Is wilderness natural? Suffice it to say that these are questions that would occupy a long research career. Many philosophers have addressed elsewhere the convoluted results of working with “nature” conceptually. Consider this short list of recent titles: *The Death of Nature, The End of Nature*, *Against Nature, Reinventing Nature, The Social Creation of Nature, The Trouble with Wilderness, Interpreting Nature*, and *The Veil of Isis*.55

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55 See Sallis, *Force*, 152, for his summary of reasons for problematizing our current concept of nature.
In lieu of nature, philosopher John Sallis offers a more specific interpretation of the environmental aesthetic factors as The Elements. Water, air, earth and fire. Sallis, an expert in Greek translation and ancient philosophy, argues that we have reached a point in our history of thought where we must revise and perfect initial and longstanding misinterpretations of our philosophical foundations. He calls this the “Return of Nature” at first, but clarifies it further as a “Turn to the Elemental.” Sallis is referring to philosophy’s need to shift from the loosely defined version of the Greek concept of nature to the detailed representation of the four elements in Greek philosophy.

Yet if today, in what borders on post-phenomenological thought, there is a certain solidarity with the Greek beginning, it is because in the turn to nature the Sache [in its Hegelian treatment] has proved to involve the elements in a sense akin to the way they were thought by the early Greek thinkers. More precisely, such thought proposes to distinguish between natural things and the elements of nature and construes the elements in their specific character as elemental. In addition, it will be necessary to take up the classical distinction in the form in which, heedless of all the questions, reservations, even comedies about it that abound in the Platonic dialogues, it was passed down in the history of philosophy and rendered entirely unproblematic…Having thus dismantled the very frame of the classical turn, this thought to come will shift its focus to the elemental in its distinction from – and its relation to – natural things. The ancient order of intelligible and sensible (στοιχεῖον) will be replaced by the dyad of elements and things.56

It is an incredible breakthrough to make note, as Sallis does, that the original philosophical translation of the ancient Greek concept στοιχεῖον as nature has been largely unquestioned. If we are to revisit the issue, he says, we would call nature not by the “intelligent” versus the “supersensible” (as in oxymoronically “nature beyond nature”) but rather describe it by the physical and very real experiences of the four elements. Instead of debating the term nature or trying to demand that as a concept it holds all ideas at once, Sallis says that through a turn to the

elemental, environmental philosophy would “cease to be bound to the classical paradigm” and would face,

A reattuning through which discourse…would be drawn beyond the structures of thinghood and brought into closer accord with the character of the elementals as encompassing, indefinite, gigantic, and peculiarly one-sided…Through such discourse a way would be opened for addressing nature in its elemental bearing and for understanding how the lives of humans – and not only of humans – are both driven and sustained, both exposed and sheltered, by the elements. ⁵⁷

I can immediately appreciate the language that Sallis employs. The words “exposed and sheltered” speak to the phenomenological experience of outdoor learning. Elemental philosophy has a number of advantages that should be preserved in any new aesthetic theory. The presence of the sky makes it clear that elementals are intimately linked to the invention of time and space, because of the sky’s day to night changes, its indefinite expanse (i.e., air versus breath versus what appears above the horizon line), and its distinct seasonality (fall, autumn, spring, winter in most places are mediated by the tide of the sky). ⁵⁸ Within this example we see that elements cannot be bound in the way that things, even the minutest things, are controlled. ⁵⁹ Sallis says “elementals are gigantic, if not simply monstrous, in their extent,” they pervade the environment in a way that art and other objects cannot. ⁶⁰ Also, elements are concurrent, not things which can be pieced apart by a moment in time. ⁶¹ Unlike an individual object, the elements layer and trace

⁵⁷ Ibid., 80. Even Sallis struggles to drop the term “nature” as a descriptor for the elements, as it has such a historically engrained language.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 79. Sallis says that the four elements essentially are time.
each other in ways that resist categorical separation. They are revealed other objects, i.e., erosion of a rock or the wind shaking a tree, but they are not present as discrete forms. Even fire, which appears most distinguishable, cannot be seen from any one side or called away from its continual reaction with the oxygen in the air that fuels it. This leads to Sallis’s final point: The elements have no single perspective or side. They are encompassing, intersecting, overlapping, and enveloping – in their relationship to humans and to each other.

In my article “An Element-ary Education” I find evidence for a Greek recognition of learning in the elements in Plato’s Phaedrus just like Sallis finds evidence of the four elements in the Timaeus. Sallis articulately synthesizes this finding: “Gazing upon the sky above and the earth beneath, the philosopher beholds not only the cosmic order but also fire and water and earth and air – that is, what we (though not Plato) call the natural elements. If philosophical vision were to remain reflective even in this regard, then the solitary philosopher would be brought back to a vision of self as situated amidst the elements, as engaged by force of necessity in comportment to the elements.” Humans need a sense of the elemental to have a sense of anything, because the elements have and always will precede us and the world as we experience it; all elements exist regardless of whether we are exposed to them or consciously sense them.

Similarly, David Macauley cites Henry Beston’s The Outermost House as evidence of the importance of creating an elemental philosophy, “The world today is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for air, for

62 Ibid. Sartre contemplates the phenomenological experience of sides in The Imaginary.
63 Sallis, Force, 148.
64 Ibid., 148-149, original emphasis.
65 Ibid., 171, 173.
the dearth earth itself underfoot,” and Frederick Woodbridge’s *Essay on Nature*, “I guess that even today when the most erudite ask what is the nature of anything, they are haunted by the answer, ‘of earth,’ ‘of water,’ ‘of air,’ or ‘of fire’ – the solid, the flowing, the gaseous, the caloric.” To complement the work done by Sallis, who sees evidence for an elemental philosophy in classical literature, Macauley begins the process of expanding elemental philosophy to a smattering of nature writers (including a few names I also consult like Abbey, Emerson, and Thoreau). And, he inadvertently uncovers learning in the elements, although he does not recognize it by name, when he says,

We might even discover something of value in all of the ambient elements. Both mundane and extraordinary encounters with elemental realms have enduring implications. They leave something of themselves on our imaginations and outlooks. Stone hardens our resolve. Clouds give us license to drift and to dream. Air conducts our voice; water channels our language and each gives shape to our corporeal form. Ice and snow teach us about the transience of sensuous things. Heat and cold temper our characters and help forge our cultural identities and temperaments.⁶⁷

These are truly brilliant observations by Sallis and Macauley, and they mark a vital shift in philosophical thought and history, but like Tonino Griffero and Eduardo Cadava, I remain unconvinced by the choice of the four ancient elements as a central aesthetic to use in working with environmental ideas. What Macauley describes above are almost entirely elements not of wind, air, fire and water, but of modern weather. The “elemental” is a beautiful term, to be sure. I have been enraptured with its elegance myself, even before I encountered Sallis’s argument for

⁶⁶ Macauley, 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 352-353.
elemental philosophy.\textsuperscript{68} And although I shall diverge from Sallis from this point on, the essence of his argument holds true.

First, it must be stated that the four elements have been largely disproved by physical science in the modern age.\textsuperscript{69} Second, the precise number of elements is arbitrary. Does the element air include the blueness of the sky reflected in water? Is a hot day basically a “fire” day? Is “flesh” an element of earth or water? Can there be more than elemental perception in our sensory experiences? These are difficult questions, and in the English language, unnatural and stubbornly trivial to debate. It is one thing to revise an ancient translation, but quite another to impose an ancient framework upon a modern understanding of physical phenomena. An elemental philosophy does much of the heavy lifting by taking us from simply nature to the elements of nature, but it cannot singlehandedly deliver an aesthetic argument to the conclusions we need in ethics and pedagogy.

Griffero instead makes a case for a philosophy of\textit{Atmosphere}. He claims that the strength of atmosphere as an aesthetic theory comes from its omnipresent familiarity to us.\textsuperscript{70} We rarely notice atmosphere in our philosophies, because it is such a pervasive part of our world understanding. He offers the example of the common phrase “there is something in the air,” words used to describe both an emotive situation and, literally, the\textit{atmos} as exhalation or vapour in the\textit{sphaire}, earthly sphere or globe. Griffero is on track to offering an aesthetic that appeals to

\textsuperscript{68} I titled my 2015 article “An Element-ary Education” while in search of a term to encompass these emerging arguments.

\textsuperscript{69} Macauley confronts this very problem when he cites Hegel in\textit{The Philosophy of Nature}: “The concept of the four elements, which has been commonplace since the time of Empedocles, has been rejected as puerile phantasy…No educated person is now permitted, under any circumstances, to mention [it].”\textsuperscript{70} As cited in Macauley, 3 (originally from Hegel, paragraph 281).

\textsuperscript{70} Griffero, 1.
a classroom environment, but he struggles to narrow atmosphere into a workable theoretical concept. Griffero states, “atmosphere, paradoxically, can be everything and nothing, a bit like ‘air;’” however, I think we should strive for an aesthetic that can be recognized as indeed being something between everything and nothing. It has much of the same historical attachment to the mimetic that art struggles to shed, and very little direct empirical association to transformation. Weather is known to be changeable and physically tangible, two things that atmosphere as a concept does not quite have the flexibility to demonstrate.

Atmosphere struggles with the same over-subtlety as Cadava’s alternative aesthetic of Climate. There is significance in Cadava’s realization that “like the movement of Emerson’s writing, the tendency of nature to incline or drift away from understanding can be read in the word climate. Derived from the ancient Greek word klima, it refers not only to a latitudinal zone of the earth but also to an inclination or slope. Climate therefore refers to both what falls from the sky and what falls away from understanding,” but patterns over time are more difficult to feel in a present-moment experience, and to sense a transformative learning experience as something, the aesthetic feeling needs to move as quickly as the modern lives we live. How can we talk about shared experiences if the aesthetic concept itself is foreign to our ordinary language? Weather talk is a folk-language. We talk about the weather daily, but climate theory is left to the scientists and news reporters, which I think indicates that what we are looking for is something more readily accessible, like an aesthetic of Weather.

We need an aesthetic philosophy of weather, because it is the only thing that is unique to the outside, non-human world, and it is the only thing that we cannot have an outdoor experience

71 Griffero, 3.
72 Cadava, 4.
without. An environment might be missing trees, buildings, art, animals, landscape, or a tangible atmosphere or climate, but there is always the feeling of weather in outdoor experience. This is not to say that weather is “better” than other choices, only that it is my preference as an aesthetic for this research project, because weather has the familiarity and affective qualities of atmosphere but the technicality of climate.

When I think of an aesthetic of weather, I think of Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert’s poignant experience of rain:

Science has made great strides. Inventions are myriad. But no one has yet invented or discovered a method to bring rain when wanted or needed. When I was a child, prayer was the only solution to the magic of rain. As I grew older and I began to read of the discoveries of science, I knew that someday the Llano would have rain at its bidding. On reaching middle age, I am still praying for rain.

My mind still holds memories of torrential rains. Papa would walk from room to room in the house watching the rain from every window and open door. I would follow like a shadow. My heart would flutter with joy to see Papa so radiant with happiness.

Often before the rain was over, we would be out on the patio. I would exclaim, "We are getting wet, Papa!" "No, no," he would say. He wanted to feel the rain, to know that it was really there. How important it was in our lives!

In this brief narrative, she highlights many of the reasons why we ought to advance an aesthetic philosophy of weather. Although weather is a common feature of our natural environment, it is non-human, cannot be manmade, and is immanent. Moreover, as I discuss in the next chapter, there is a long-held practice of weather metaphors and weather talk that can already reveal unique qualities of our experience learning in weather.

73 Anderson and Edwards, 186.
Chapter III

Truth in Weather Talk

In this chapter I explore the language of nature writing by suggesting that nature writers have tapped into the underappreciated subgenre of “weather talk.” Nature writers’ specific attention to weather talk centralizes around descriptions of aesthetic experience that I believe hold significant learning value. Actually, one might say that these nature writers carry with these aesthetic ideas the truth that is inherent in weather talk, in the choice of conceptualizations, metaphors, anecdotes, and descriptors.

The supple notion of truth that I am using here is not a correspondence, propositional, or coherence theory of truth. It is not attached to any formal philosophical conceptualization, but it still must be addressed, because there is a sort of truthfulness that these seven nature writers carry in their words, a kind of “true to life-ness” and seriousness about their philosophical writing that makes us take pause and contemplate it as expressing something fundamentally real about human experience. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that we do not take metaphorical language seriously enough to bring it to our philosophical discussions of truth as we so easily do with talk of morals and politics. Miguel de Beistegui argues for a “sense of metaphor rooted in the very structure of experience and not simply a rhetorical trope” in relation to Marcel Proust’s written metaphors.\(^74\) “The work of metaphor is more ‘true,’ then, than what’s achieved in a realist description because it captures in an image and fixes for all eternity a unique relationship

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\(^74\) de Beistegui, 71.
between the present and the past, between sensation and memory.” This chapter’s focus on truth dramatizes my conviction that there is something deeply real about weather talk.

The Necessity of Metaphorical Language

Language permeates our daily meaning making. The inescapable presence of language and our heavily populated social world leads us to desire to express even the most difficult ideas with words. After all, we want to be able to share the meanings that we make. But if learning is so deeply embodied in our selves and through our environment that we may not be able to manage a lexicon large enough to suit it, more challenging ideas like an “aesthetically transformative dimension” will undoubtedly stretch the limits of our words. Thankfully, humans have the ability to make connections between multiple intricate source domains of cognitive content. This power is housed in the practice of metaphorical language.

Philosophy that applies metaphorical language might be designated “lyric.” Jan Zwicky posits that lyric philosophy “sets aside historical associations with Romantic poetry in order to pursue what might be called its deep epistemological structure” Instead of logic or mathematics, the properties of lyric philosophy are resonance and integrity, what Zwicky declares to be a linguistic reprieve. She adds that “those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world,” because a good metaphor is “attempt to tell the truth, to get at the shapes of what-is.”

75 Ibid., 92.
76 Zwicky, Wisdom, 11.
It is worth adding I.A. Richards’s point that “a word may be simultaneously both literal and metaphoric, just as it may simultaneously support many different metaphors, may serve to focus into one meaning many different meanings. This point is of some importance, since so much misinterpretation comes from supposing that if a word works one way it cannot simultaneously work in another and have simultaneously another meaning.”\textsuperscript{78} For this reason, I cannot claim that all of the metaphors I notice in this research are only metaphors and not also literally intended. This is the genius of reading lyrical philosophy, as we get both direct and indirect meaning from it. Although it may mean that I miss some angles as I attempt to analyze others, there is power in that process too, in how we can continue to learn more about ideas from rereading metaphorical writing.

Paul Ricoeur supports a comparable philosophy of metaphor in his book \textit{The Rule of Metaphor}. Ricoeur writes on Max Black’s \textit{Models and Metaphors} that “integration of model and metaphor, in other words, of an epistemological concept and a poetic concept…is completely opposed to any reduction of metaphor to a mere ‘ornament.’”\textsuperscript{79} Moreover, “One must say that metaphor bears information,” or as I propose earlier, carries truth, “because it ‘redescribes’ reality.”\textsuperscript{80}

Metaphorical language, or just “metaphor,” is mankind’s solution to the limitations of lexicons. In the popularly cited book \textit{Metaphors We Live By}, linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson explain that metaphors are used in speech, thought, and writing to cross the boundaries between one meaning and an entirely new and otherwise seemingly

\textsuperscript{78} As cited in Zwicky, \textit{Lyric}, §15. Original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{79} Black as cited in Ricoeur, 22.

\textsuperscript{80} Ricoeur, 22.
incompatible second meaning. Through metaphor, an ocean can describe a plethora of choices (“the menu offered an ocean of options”) or a mood can be bright and hot (“his disposition is sunny”).\textsuperscript{81} Metaphors allow conventional language to characterize ineffable concepts and accommodate extraordinary experiences.

Simply speaking, metaphors allow for “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another,” but that is where the simplicity ends.\textsuperscript{82} Metaphors are able to spatially orient, characterize, reveal or obscure, reflect cultural value, express ontology, and personify the unfamiliar. Lakoff and Johnson identify three general types of metaphors: structural, orientational, and ontological. \textit{Structural metaphors} help us to understand the characteristics of a concept. By highlighting particular aspects of one concept, we can illuminate subtle aspects of another. The structural metaphor of a “foggy memory,” for example, can be reworded with the verb “is” to represent “a metaphor for” something.\textsuperscript{83} When we look at this phrase, “fogginess is [a metaphor for] memory,” we can recognize that fog is characterized by reduced vision, and memory is characterized by a “vision” or accessibility to images of the past. Thus, a “foggy memory” would tell us that our perception of the past is currently occluded.

\textit{Orientational metaphors} also reveal a characteristic of one concept by means of another, but in particular, they are related to spatial, such as linear or circular, vertical or horizontal

\textsuperscript{81} Peter Howie and Richard Bagnall interpret Mezirow’s transformative learning theory as its own “beautiful metaphor.” Instead of reading the word “transformative” as merely an adjective describing a type of learning, Howie and Bagnall present “transformative” and “learning” as separate domains that combine the conceptual and extended metaphors of what is “transformative” to that which is a “learning experience,” 822-823.

\textsuperscript{82} Lakoff and Johnson, 5.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 20.
orientation in the world. How humans orient concepts, even entirely abstract concepts that lack experiential grounding, indicates the very deep influence of culture on metaphors. Land areas are especially poignant orientational metaphors, as they are already operational on a spatial plane (e.g. indoors or outdoors, inside, etc.). Since orientational metaphors are limited in purpose, they are rarely recognized as figurative. The omission of orientational metaphors is understandable, because “merely viewing a nonphysical thing as an entity or substance does not allow us to comprehend very much about it.”

In contrast to the elusiveness of orientational metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson’s third type, ontological metaphors, are “so pervasive that they are usually taken as self-evident.” When we need a metaphor to assist in conceptualizing things that are not discrete or bound, we turn to ontological metaphors to give these ideas form and structure. Ontological metaphors categorize and “impose artificial boundaries” on physical phenomena. In this way, we are able to make the world around us conform to our embodied viewpoint, which is phenomenologically-speaking the only perspective human senses can obtain. Adding structure to abstract concepts with ontological metaphor is more freeing than it sounds, though. Ontological metaphor makes it

84 Lakoff and Johnson, 13.
85 Ibid., 57.
86 Ibid., 29. Consider the Dreaming songs sung by Maori people on Walkabouts, where each landmark has a metaphorical connection to the native origin story, Abram, 168-169.
87 Lakoff and Johnson, 27.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 28.
90 Ibid., 25.
possible for an otherwise ungraspable idea to convene with concepts already at our cognitive level.

There are used and unused portions of every concept in a metaphor. In other words, there are parts of our usual gestalt of a concept that may be active in the metaphor, while other parts are not. For instance, starting with the metaphor “theories are buildings,” a person’s gestalt of “buildings” might include doors, rooms, walls, foundation, construction, or blueprints. Immediately that person would aim to identify one of these elements of a building that is commonly used in metaphors. It is likely that the initial understanding would involve relating the outer structure of a building to the literal idea of the structure of a theory. The most used aspects of a gestalt compose literal metaphors. But not all metaphors automatically point to the most used or literal aspects. Lakoff and Johnson note three kinds of “imaginative metaphors,” which go beyond the fastidious conventions of literal language use.

First, some imaginative metaphors extend the typical used parts into greater detail (e.g. “bricks and mortal” rather than “foundation”). Second, other metaphors may exercise typically unused aspects of the concepts (e.g. rooms). The third kind of imaginative metaphors completely break the conventional mold, inviting new ways of thinking. These rebellious metaphors are called novel, and I take them to be a linguistic expression of transformative learning.

Lakoff and Johnson appear to support the prospect of novel metaphor as expressive of transformative learning through their example on love: “What we experience with [novel] metaphor is a kind of reverberation down through the network of entailments that awakens and connects our memories of our past love experiences and serves as a possible guide for future

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91 Lakoff and Johnson, 52.

92 Ibid., 53.
A metaphor can stress some aspects of activity in ways that our conventional conceptual system
does not make available. And so, as a “possible guide for future” experience, novel
metaphors may act to shift our conceptual perspectives. Other advantages of novel metaphors are
that they reorganize experiences, specify important conceptual details, refresh meanings, affect
human action (e.g., if “love is work” we will try harder than if think “love is madness”), and add
personal touches to what would otherwise be rote cultural dictation. However, changing or
adding metaphors is not commonplace. More often than not, it is the unspoken job of culture to
gain and lose metaphors over time. Artistic mediums such as poetry or literature endeavor to
make novel metaphors, but aesthetic experiencing itself is not limited to the art world. In
principle, novel metaphors can be generated by thorough attention to environmental sensations.

In “A Poetics of Teaching,” David Hansen points out two objections to Lakoff and
Johnson’s theory that metaphors state reality, in other words, that truth is based on
understanding. The first objection, launched by Gaston Bachelard, is that metaphor lacks
“directness.” As Plato argues that art is mere imitation in the Republic, metaphor is like a third
degree removed from the form of the object or the experience itself. Hansen manages to find
multiple instances where Bachelard himself relies on the power of metaphor to move theory –
clearly metaphors have deep-seated communicative value.

93 Ibid., 140.
94 Lakoff and Johnson, 141-145.
95 Ibid., 145.
96 Ibid., 236.
97 Hansen, 127.
98 Ibid., 128.
Hansen identifies a quote from Nietzsche wherein a second objection to Lakoff and Johnson’s overall claim that truth is based on understanding and objective truth is a myth might be raised. Nietzsche suggests that truth can be easily warped by metaphor, making it an utter illusion. Lakoff and Johnson might respond by saying this is an irrelevant concern, because the real significance of metaphor lies in the process of trying to understand how its reality could be true, not whether or not it in fact. It is the impetus to learn sparked by imaginative language operating in an unfamiliar way that makes metaphor essential. “It is as though the ability to comprehend experience through metaphor were a sense, like seeing or touching or hearing, with metaphors providing the only ways to perceive and experience much of the world. Metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch, and as precious,” Lakoff and Johnson write in their Afterword, p. 239. For research on something like aesthetic experience that cannot be contained in a single semantic field, a collection of metaphors from seasoned outdoorspeople could yield prize data.

Scholars have already used linguistic science to make sense of challenging aesthetic concepts. For example, in Homo Ludens, J. Huizinga analyzes the aesthetic nature of play by examining how humans construct our languages around it. Stanley Cavell in The Senses of Walden and Lawrence Buell in The Environmental Imagination each explore literary devices used by Henry David Thoreau to express complicated themes. Edward Mooney in Wilderness and the Heart compares Henry Bugbee’s writing to “lyrics” like the “lyrical philosophy” developed by Jan Zwicky, and Peter Larkin in “Maculate Exception” identifies Wordsworth’s use of “spots of time” (an idea that bears an uncanny resemblance to transformative learning

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99 Lakoff and Johnson, 179-182.

100 Hansen, 128.
experience) as a metaphor that describes aesthetic experiencing.\textsuperscript{101} Considering these projects that amplify aesthetic writing and other great scholarly work published in the past two to three years on nature walks, atmosphere, and the way we speak about the weather,\textsuperscript{102} there is significant room to make the argument that we already have the tools and materials for theorizing this strange and inexplicable experience.

**Meteorological Practice as Processing Not Forecasting**

According to Oxford English Dictionary, meteorology is a branch of science concerned with the processes and atmospheric phenomena of weather and climate, usually referring to the practice of trying to predict or forecast the weather. But meteorology is only commonly associated with future weather prediction, not always related. In the other cases, meteorology is the practice of processing what is presently happening in the atmosphere. This is the type of meteorology my research emphasizes, the mode of seeing what is, not what might be. This is an art, a practice, a process, we so often neglect.\textsuperscript{103} The practice of reading the weather is the very same tradition of environmental hermeneutics to which this study’s methodology adheres.

What I mean by meteorological practice is similar to what we mean when we talk about the medical practice. There is certainly a physical science to medicine as there is to

\textsuperscript{101} Wordsworth’s writing is further evidence that we employ an array of words to describe transformative learning.

\textsuperscript{102} For further reading see books and articles by Frédéric Gros, Alexandra Harris, Izabela Żołnowska, Cynthia Barnett, Richard Mabey, John Sallis, Laura Redniss, and Roger Gilbert.

\textsuperscript{103} Clarification: Art is not to be contrasted with science. The colloquial phrase “teaching is an art, not a science” I believe is a misunderstanding of the functioning role of poetics in all science. In the next chapter we will explore the overlaps of meaning making in linguistic science and poetic metaphors.
meteorological forecasting, but in practice the concern is for the current system’s functioning. If a person comes in with a stomachache, it is the doctor’s goal to diagnose and treat the present condition before preventative measures can be taken. The example of medical practice is imperfect, though; because when the example is taken one step further the goal is for the doctor to help the patient avoid future stomachaches, whereas for educators, the eventual goal is to boost student transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather.

Meteorological practice as processing also follows in the footsteps of the ancient Stoics. For the Stoics, philosophy was a way of life. Instead of the concept of morality where there are good and bad decisions to make, rights and wrongs to evaluate, the Stoics believed in ethics as it originates from the Greek work ethos and self-care. An ethics of self-care is a progressive striving for virtues and a better, more examined life. Through daily rituals like journaling or reflection, known by Foucault as spiritual exercises or askesis, the Stoics aimed to not only act and make wise decisions but also to continuously train their minds/bodies to live more ethically. Muir, Thoreau, and Dillard exemplify nontraditional philosophers in their focus on ethics and philosophy as a way of life, a philosophical pathway that nicely complements hermeneutical study. The practice they are involved in aims to recognize learning when it happens and avoiding predictions or prescriptions for future action that might misappropriate the meticulously individualized processes of learning and experiencing.

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104 See Hadot’s book by this same title.

105 Foucault, 282.

106 Ibid., 281.
Chapter IV

Philosophical Methods

A Study in Environmental Hermeneutics

There is an elaborate history behind my choice of methods for this project. When I first began the preliminary research I immediately recognized this as a study in *environmental philosophy*, but this is much too broad a field to offer direction. Thus, I turned to *aesthetic philosophy*, a field that is often split in two between the subject of art and the subject of nature. Choosing the latter as better related to the environment out-of-doors, there is then the challenge of what particular dimension of the aesthetics of nature I study. Traditionally, the dimensions most philosophized are those of taste: the *beautiful*, the *sublime*, and the *picturesque*. This study falls squarely in the middle, with Immanuel Kant’s idea of the sublime as its influence. However, the Kantian sublime of the 1700s can be only compared, as we learned in my review of literature, to the experience of transformative learning that I envision; it is never quite exactly the same sort of experience.

Instead of choosing a current dimension of aesthetics of nature, I propose a re-characterization of the aesthetics of elemental philosophy, framed by a new aesthetic theory of weather. Historian of aesthetic philosophy Allen Carlson would say that the elements then are my “object” of philosophical study. However, I want to further push the boundaries of modern aesthetic philosophy by balking at the common principle that aesthetics must be analyzed with an object in mind. In the aesthetic experience I identify, there is no set form to wrap the eye around, because it is, like the Kantian sublime, a wisp or a feeling, not the classically defined judgment of taste such as beauty alone might be. John Sallis explains that if we are to see aesthetics in this
way, “All [philosophy] would hinge on declaring: though all things are earth, earth is not a thing.”107 That is to say that unlike most aestheticians, I am not aiming for a theory of how to appreciate the natural environment but rather a philosophy of how it is, in reality, experienced. Although all things are made of these aesthetic qualities, the aesthetic is not simply a quality or material object. One might recognize this as a more eco-phenomenological stance, which would be correct only in part, because again, this is first and foremost a study in the aesthetics at play in an experience, not only the embodied experience itself.

So here we reach another sticking point: If I want to view aesthetics from the subjective position, not as objective form, how can aesthetics be framed at all? What is the product? In other words, I face the age-old problem of literally everything on earth becoming material for aesthetic valuation. It cannot be correct to say that all things are beautiful, sublime, or picturesque. Under these conditions, it no longer matters that I wish to focus on the environment, because the argument runs away from itself immediately. Carlson calls this the nonaesthetic critique, as in everything becomes aesthetic, so any proper concept of aesthetics is negated entirely.108 However, Carlson and I find the nonaesthetic reduction “deeply counterintuitive.” He cites human reactions toward sunsets or birds in flight and says, “The Western tradition in aesthetics, as well as other traditions, such as the Japanese, has long been committed to a doctrine that explicitly contradicts the nonaesthetic conception…that anything that can be viewed can be viewed aesthetically.”

107 Sallis, 174. Henry Bugbee expresses a similar sentiment in The Inward Morning, “…What would be distinctive of philosophical reflection, thus conceived, would be bound up with the idea of experience itself: Perhaps in all strictness we would have to realize more and more that experience is not a subject-matter susceptible to objective representation and deliberate control” (58, original emphasis). See also Bugbee, 151, on according “due weight to aesthetic experience in our interpretation of reality.”

108 Carlson, 9.
Concerning the art-based approaches, it is argued that they do not fully realize the serious, appropriate appreciation of nature, but distort the true character of natural environments…”109 Indeed, applying the landscape model, for example, flattens the environment into mere scenery. A deep aesthetic experience outdoors cannot exist if the effect is the same as standing indoors looking through a window, which I fervently argue is not equivalent because of the constituent weather. But with a touch of American pragmatism in the mix, a la John Dewey’s later works, there is I believe a convincing way that one might conceptualize an experience-centered aesthetic theory without falling down the regressive path to nonaesthetics. The environment must be valuable in and of itself.

With the subject of an environmental aesthetics traced to its starting point, I have now to choose a method of exploration. For this, I return to environmental philosophy and the just recently formalized subfield of environmental philosophy, environmental hermeneutics.110 As argued by Mark Johnson in The Meaning of the Body, aesthetics is an examination of meaning making.

Aesthetics is properly an investigation of everything that goes into human meaning-making, and its traditional focus on the arts stems primarily from the fact that arts are exemplary cases of consummated meaning. However, any adequate aesthetics of cognition must range far beyond the arts proper to explore how meaning is possible for creatures without our types of bodies, environments…111

109 Ibid., 9.

110 Environmental hermeneutics is treated as the “third phase” of environmental philosophy. Clingerman, 11.

111 Johnson, xi. Johnson is inspired by the previously quoted passage from Dewey, Art as Experience, 554.
Since I take aesthetics to be the descriptor by which we discover meaning in our experiences, then the final piece that remains in my philosophic methodology is a process for how one might locate that aesthetic meaning. This process is Gadamer’s inspired conceptual interpretation method of hermeneutics. Environmental hermeneutics is based on the claim that there is no “unmediated encounter with nature.” Instead of debating the reality of nature in and of itself (i.e., what is noumenal), hermeneutics tracks the usage history of the terms surrounding the concept of nature, interpreting how we experience it. Again, this reveals my commitment to a pragmatic and eco-phenomenological view of our outdoor experiences, the strong position that the point of a study is not to analytically “divide and conquer” but to reveal and illuminate the materials of experience as they are presented to us, in this case, through a hermeneutic reading of nature writing, in all its contextual and historical depth. Collecting accounts of aesthetic outdoor experience can help to identify unique learning that happens during those moments in time.

Identifying Aesthetic Experiences in Nature Writing

Pioneer of the environmental literary field of ecocriticism Lawrence Buell, in The Environmental Imagination p. 7-8, explains that the 18th to 19th century foundational genre of nature writing in antebellum American and European literature has four features that distinguish it from other scientific or reportorial environmental texts. These characteristics are listed here.

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.

2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.

112 Clingerman, 5.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.

4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

We can see that a common feature in nature writing is the prominence of the environment as a textual character in its own right, not as a standard literary setting. While the writer may speak from a traditionally human, first person narrator (often the author him or herself), the topic of the book and the strong portrayal of the environment is more than mere scenery. Frank Stewart in *A Natural History of Nature Writing* argues that nature writing’s emphasis on personal knowledge conjunctively allows nature, as in human nature, to know itself.\(^{113}\) Stewart hypothesizes that “nature writers past and present help us to understand in the most intimate fashion how our ideas about nature and our beliefs concerning the physical facts of science configure and disfigure the world that is not us.”\(^{114}\) Beyond nature writers’ messages to their readers, we see in their intimate notes (more on the intimacy of aesthetic experiences at the end of this chapter) that the environment mirrors the each writer’s own nature and ecological role. It is for this reason that I take the genre of nature writing to be an authoritative source for representative accounts of how humans learn in, of, by, and from the environment.

As to the choice of texts, my goal was to pick works by well-regarded and known nature writers for the purpose of making their points more accessible to my readers, who might have already studied their work. This might prevent the possible objection that an obscure author is not archetypical of human time spent outdoors. I hope it also allows my reader to recognize the opacity of the aesthetic experience I delve into, because it shows how often we have read these

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\(^{113}\) Stewart, 233.

\(^{114}\) Ibid., 219.
texts without honoring their unusually educational nature. In the last chapter, I explained that these nature writers were also chosen for their philosophical inclinations toward askesis and living an ethical life of self-care. These seven writers are beautiful expositors of philosophy as a way of life in the tradition of wisdom seeking, where learning is not reducible to knowledge.

Unfortunately, I have found that using only the most famous writers greatly limits the number of woman-authored texts I can examine. To combat this limitation, when possible I include a female voice in the discussion, even if she is less known. By offering a wider range of voices, when possible, while still distilling the data to a manageable volume, I am actually allowing for a better understanding of typical human experience outdoors, because the environment is not only interpreted as masculine. As for whether or not the points drawn from the far-ranging texts agree with each other, their commensurability is examined throughout the exposition. I recognize also, and must make crystal clear in advance, the most regrettable limitation of choosing only these seven canonical nature writers whose writing is already widely circulated and accepted in environmental studies. A second research project (proposed in Chapter VII) must be conducted that incorporates and exclusively analyzes the experiences of non-white, minority men and women and highlights their critical contributions to the presuppositions I make here in my small starter sample set.

In the subsection below I discuss my research methods for locating aesthetic experiences in nature writing as well as some clarifying remarks on my treatment of these experiences in my academic writing.
Collecting Experiences

My data collection involved close reading and examination of seven texts by a selection of philosophically minded nature writers: John Muir, Edward Abbey, Mary Oliver, Gretel Ehrlich, William Wordsworth, Henry David Thoreau, and Annie Dillard. Rather than analyzing nature writers’ work as creative renderings, I was influenced by Buell’s historical reading of the nature genre (Thoreau’s works in specific) as cultural commentary. Herein I aim to illuminate the pedagogical undercurrents, the “philosophy of life” as Hadot might say, of this genre. By re-reading the classic nature writers as innovative environmental philosophers and educators, my goal is to conceptualize those learning experiences outdoors that seem to have become, for the reasons detailed in Chapters V and VI, perceived as transformative by these learners.

The challenge, of course, was to limit the scope and number of texts for a manageable project while at the same time selecting and perusing a significant sample size to permit robust theorizing. In order to ensure that my reading of the texts was rigorous and directed, I had beside me a bulleted list of my personal observations from many months living outdoors to compare to the authors’ experiences and a list of questions that I was hoping the text would answer. Here is a sampling of the questions I asked each text:

-  *For this author, what is an example of a transformative experience outdoors?* I will find a sample selection from the text where the author draws out an aesthetic experience outdoors in great detail.

-  *What does he or she describe happens during that moment?* I make note of the words that the author uses to illuminate the experience.

-  *What features make it educational?* Does the author make note of how it is helping him or her to grow? I note words that indicate positive change.
- What transformative learning dimensions are engaged by the experience? I look at the words indicating positive change and explore whether they suggest that the transformation is psychological, behavioral, convictional, aesthetic, or holistic (all of the above).

- How does the author feel it differs from other learning experiences? I examine the author’s choice of language to see if he or she considers this to be an especially deep or unique moment, or rather, something ordinary and everyday.

- How does the author use metaphors or analogies with weather to bring their experience to light? Reflecting on the answers to the previous questions, I consider the language choices the author made. How did they feel that this experience was best represented? Is the weather referenced directly or indirectly? If not, what other words does the author use to portray transformative learning outdoors?

Again, I borrow the anti-dualist research attitude from John Dewey’s first chapter of Experience and Nature and second chapter of Art as Experience, with the intention of reinforcing Dewey’s argument that, save for heuristic purposes, the mind cannot be separated from the body and secondary experience cannot be separated from primary experience. Although it is helpful to clarify experience by describing it as primary or secondary, and I make many statements that philosophically shape our thinking about education in order to better understand it, neither Dewey nor I are stating that we should imagine two radically, or ontologically, divorced types of experience. Consider that secondary experience can be integral in the original experiencing, just as primary experience must be revisited and recalled to allow for secondary experiencing. I mention this point because it can be too easy to incorrectly view my research as the pinning-down of ideas that up until now we have respected as utterly ineffable; in other
words, as if I am trying to make the “wild” philosophy of the outdoors pragmatic to the point of rigidity. I am conspicuously aware of this concern and do not wish to detract from any of the wonder or mystery of the outdoors. But I also know this to be patently impossible. No attempts to clarify and understand the outdoors could ever remove its uncontrolled qualities. Dewey, Thoreau, and all our other nature writers have tried to bring a philosophy of transformative learning outdoors to life in parts, yet none have “ruined” the outdoor experience for us. Fear of harnessing its educational power should not prohibit philosophical research. It is perhaps this concern that has, up until now, prevented us from conceiving of the importance and prominence of transformative outdoor learning. Thus, I cannot say it enough: There is a difference between hermeneutically drawing out the features of an experience and explaining away that experience with words. My project is entirely the former.

**Literal and Metaphorical Expressions of Experience**

As explained in Chapter III, words are key to this research. It is through the written account of outdoorspeople that I make some sense of transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather-rich environments. The questions that I asked, the quotes that I found, and the research that I drew upon, require an acute attentiveness to metaphorical language. Metaphor is essential, because nature writing has a long tradition of exercising it to make meaningful philosophical points. Furthermore, as argued by Zwicky, Ricoeur, de Beistegui, and

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115 Jack Turner argues in his book *The Abstract Wild* that humans need direct contact with wilderness in order to ethically acknowledge it as deserving respect and care. In Turner’s view, literary narratives like John Muir’s cannot adequately represent primary experience. Brian Treanor defends Muir’s nature writing by citing philosophical evidence of the value of narrative. See Treanor, 182-188.
Lakoff and Johnson in the last chapter’s discussion, metaphor is a constituent way of thinking and feeling aesthetically.

In my data collection, I model the method of metaphor interpretation that Lakoff and Johnson use in *Metaphors We Live By*. Phrases found in selections of nature writing might be arranged as simple sentences, with the verb “is” as a substitute for “is a metaphor for” (e.g., from “a cold reception” to “cold is a metaphor for reception” to “a gathering of people has a climate”). From this position, I looked to identify the type of metaphor at work (i.e., structural, orientational, or ontological). While Lakoff and Johnson admit to a focus on conventional metaphor,\(^{116}\) I do rather the opposite, searching almost exclusively for ideas defined in nature writings through the employment of novel ontological metaphor. I concentrated on locating novel ontological metaphors: first, because they break with conventional, cultural language about the environment (and conventional language is already known to us), and second, because ontological metaphor is best poised to handle the perceptual complexities of expressing a transformative learning experience. I focus on the writers’ use of weather metaphors, also known as “weather talk,” as literary indicators of aesthetic experiences.

The interpretive method is necessary for pursuing my research question, because the experience in question has never been conceptually defined. Painting a portrait of this philosophically “new” type of experience from nature texts requires careful study and “reading between the lines” of each writer to see if original details may be noted. Only then can I honestly depict the final picture’s unprecedented curves and colors. This methodology strongly simulates the process used by Stanley Cavell in *The Senses of Walden*, David Abrams in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, and Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination*.

\(^{116}\) Lakoff and Johnson, 139.
While at first glance reading the human perspective on the outdoors might appear anthropocentric, my overall research goal is not. My understanding of the outdoors, like many of the nature writers’ I read, is based on the recognition of humans as only one aspect of the environment. Our learning outdoors is a window into our relationship with non-human others, animals, plants, and non-living things. Selecting and viewing texts is a subjective process, but this can be a research strength instead of a weakness, as it allows me to read the authors generously and meticulously, as I can relate to their findings and am familiar with the language often chosen.

**Honoring the Intimacy of Aesthetic Experience**

I am struck by a comment once made to me by Paul Standish. He proposed that a kind of careful integrity hangs over nature writing as it does with other artforms. If nature writing is over explained, it simply morphs into something else entirely to protect itself, like the Veil of Isis, nature’s true nature likes to hide. Nature writing, then, is personal, deep, subjective, and private. It is intimate and needs to be described likewise.117 Take, for example, reading a book review before you have read the book, or being told that the Mona Lisa is frowning when you always thought she smiled. “Insight is earned, to be sure, but it is not steered, and it must find its own articulate form,” explains Henry Bugbee, “such a philosophy will not be set up like the solution of a puzzle, worked out with all the pieces lying there before the eye. It will be more like the

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117 See Mooney’s *Lost Intimacy* for a detailed discussion of how intimacy in nature writing relates to American philosophy.
clarification of what we know in our bones.”\textsuperscript{118} The effort to pinch an experience into analytical form can dissolve the experience itself. So, like Bugbee, I make this methodological commitment to the integrity of nature writing:

I am going to try to be faithful to the intimations I have had: That the reflection worth indulging doesn’t know where it’s going, just s the life that is lived underlies anything the individual is able to patent for himself. There need be no obscurantism in this; if philosophical truth is engendered in depth, we must not expect it to come to light except out of relative obscurity.\textsuperscript{119}

Note Bugbee’s use of the words “faith” and “intimations.” Mooney clarifies this as the call for philosophers to be sensitive to the intimacy of the experience and to have faith and patience that there is meaning within the words, even if they at first appear obscure or unfamiliar.\textsuperscript{120} Bugbee uses rivers as a metaphor of articulating intimacy:

It seems there is a stream of limitless meaning flowing into the life of a man if he can but patiently entrust himself to it. There is no hurry, only the need to be true to what comes to mind, and to explore the current carefully in which one presently moves. There is a constant fluency of meaning in the instant in which we live. One may learn of it from rivers in the constancy of their utterance, if one listens and is still. They speak endlessly in an univocal exhalation, articulating the silence.

This calls to mind something Max Picard has to say: Spring does not come from winter; it comes from the silence from which winter came and summer and autumn.”\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{118} Bugbee, 33-34; 35.
\textsuperscript{119} Bugbee, 35.
\textsuperscript{120} Mooney, \textit{Lost Intimacy}, 223-224. Interestingly, it is also in this book that Mooney himself comes quite close to identifying learning in weather and the questions of this dissertation, when he writes, “In forty days and nights of snow among the trees deep in the Canadian Rockies, Bugbee knows himself to have been instructed for life. We want a sense of the source of instruction. A capacity of rivers to teach or of falling snow to transform a soul,” 43.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 83.
This is how I aim to illuminate these texts – with time, reflection, walking, birding, and my own journal entries and photographs – with patience, listening to what at first seems like only silence. Of course, I have some hurry to keep up with the pace of life in New York City, but Bugbee’s passage gives some sense of the ways in which I have tried to consciously slow down my thought to appropriately match the experiences as they unfold. It is not the usual course of argumentative thinking; it is instead, as explained through my method of metaphor interpretation, a matter for maintaining a way of thinking that is within itself aesthetic, lyric, poetical. My philosophical methodology adheres as well as possible to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s declaration in his posthumously published book *Culture and Value*, “Philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition.”

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122 Edward Mooney is influenced by this quote from Basho’s *Knapsack Notebook*, 9, “mountain shelter or a hut in the moor become seeds for words, a way to become intimate with wind and cloud. Listen recklessly.”

123 Wittgenstein, 24. Translated from the German, “Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten.” It is interesting to note that this quote was originally a journal entry, evidence that Wittgenstein followed the ethical tradition of philosophy as *askesis* discussed in Chapter III and VI. Emerson also makes a similar statement: “But none of them [Miller, Locke, Manning] owns the landscape. There is a property *in the horizon* which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet,” *Nature*, 38. Emphasis added to highlight how Emerson lists poetry and the environment in one smooth breath.
Chapter V

Articulating the Aesthetic Experience Outdoors

Since it is has been established herein that learning experiences can be framed by aesthetic experiences – even primed by aesthetic experiencing outdoors – there is no more timely a mission now than to determine how those experiences are manifest. And there are no greater experts than nature writers, who spend lifetimes seeking to express the deep meaning of these transformative outdoor experiences. Each of these seven selected nature writers and their seminal texts gives us a new angle on the weather and, as grounding for my thesis, a fundamental demonstration of the truth to the argument that we do experience transformative aesthetic learning in weather-rich environments.

In the next two chapters, the bulk of my research passages and data, I have read through a handful of the most famous publications in the genre of nature writing. From each text, I borrow a theme from the writer and demonstrate how these themes centered on weather are pervasive and pedagogically relevant to an understanding of transformative learning experiences outdoors. These chapters are intended, in response to Wittgenstein’s call for philosophers to make poetry of their work, to constitute a mode of lyrical philosophy introduced by Zwicky, and which I take to be the best way to honor the professional nature writer’s eternal challenge of putting to words the patently ineffable, the poet’s challenge of representing and transcribing reality. I insert vignettes from my personal journals of the writers’ themes as they emerge to illustrate how universally familiar some of these experiences may seem to seasoned outdoorspeople, and also to highlight how context, history, and personal differences create unique features of these experiences for each writer.
Edward Abbey and Relentless Heat

When I began this research journey, I thought there could be no better expression of aesthetic learning experiences in the outdoors than Thoreau’s *Walden*. Then I “met” through this study Edward Abbey, a park ranger in Arches National Monument, Utah, in the 1960s, and a philosopher by training and nature. In his book *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, Abbey introduces his primary teacher, as old as the world: the sun. To say that the sun is a theme in his book is no stretch at all – he talks of little else! Still, from an outsider’s perspective on the genre of nature writing, it may seem almost ridiculous to imagine the sun as a teacher – almost blasphemous to those of us who have devoted our lives to the study of education. But imagine the sun in a different light (literally), as the central figure in every human’s life. The sun is there, day and night, whether it is obvious or not; but often, it is the most observable constant on earth. This is evidenced in the shock factor of stories like Ray Bradbury’s “All Summer in a Day,” which shows that only in a dystopian world, an unnatural extreme, can we imagine a life never seeing the sun. And if we can call the planet “Mother Earth” colloquially, without a second thought, then why not the sun, Teacher?

Concerning that “different light” that I previously referenced, Abbey understands the sun as omnipresent, overwhelming, but also revealing and direct:

*The sun reigns, I am drowned in light.* At this hour, sitting alone at the focal point of the universe, surrounded by a thousand square miles of largely uninhabited no-man’s-land – or all-man’s-land – I cannot seriously be

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124 In the Swedish language there is an equivalent concept of “allemansplats,” or literally “all man’s place,” which dictates that any land in Sweden can be traversed or camped on by any citizen (“the freedom to roam”), so long as no trace of human usage remains. When Abbey uses this phrase, we see that he is coming to the understanding that ownership of the Arches is shared, even though humans are not present. Perhaps he is losing his possessive control over the park (introduced on p.5 of *Desert Solitaire*), but it is more likely that by this phrase, Abbey means that all wild *creatures/objects*, broadly, have a right to roam this place.
disturbed by any premonitions of danger to my vulnerable wilderness or my all-too-perishable republic. All dangers seem equally remote. In this glare of brilliant emptiness, in this arid intensity of pure heat, in the heart of a weird solitude, great silence and grand desolation, all things recede to distances out of reach, reflecting light but impossible to touch, annihilating all thought and all that men have made to a spasm of whirling dust far out on the golden desert.

(132, emphasis added)

Here Abbey makes the direct metaphor that “sunlight is water that can sweep over and drown a person.” How does this help us to understand his experience of the sun as Teacher? It demonstrates how fully immersed he is in the “lessons” it teaches. In particular, the sun in the desert, how it drowns the land, Abbey says, is bright and radiant but devoid of life. He uses the word “brilliant” to describe this sunlight across the sands, which is interesting, because brilliance can be defined as either an intense luminosity or intelligence. I do not think that this double entendre is an error. Rather, it leads to the important question: How can sunlight be both “empty” and “brilliant?” The answer lies in the last sentence of Abbey’s paragraph, the end-cap to an extended metaphor of the sun. He says that in this sunlight all things pull away from human grasp (physically) and understanding (mentally). We cannot conceive of it, because the sunlight reflected across the desert causes an “annihilation of thought.” But again, the extinction of thought is not unintelligent; it is merely the difference between what man can control (formal linguistic thought) and what the sun can express (the impalpable aesthetic).

It is also fascinating to analyze Abbey’s description of sunlight as “pure heat.” Consider that purity is the completeness of one type of thing. For example, pure bliss would the complete experience of happiness. If there is to be a “pure heat,” we must define “heat.” In the desert, pure heat for Abbey must be the complete lack of any water or moisture in the air. A dry heat would be pure. Keeping in mind that water is life-giving, it is marvelous to think of anything lifeless as

\[125\] This theme of intelligence is one that we will return to many times over, notably in Thoreau.
“pure.” This metaphor rubs purity against our modern sensibilities, calling it out as something that can be problematically non-diverse or stagnant. Yet, we recall that Abbey begins his paragraph with a metaphor of the sun to water: capable of drowning a person. Perhaps, then, Abbey means that the pure heat of the sun is something that can choke us? He is saying that we can have the feeling of drowning when experiencing the complete absence of water. So, is Abbey’s teacher an ironic murderess, drowning us in dryness? Most certainly – the sun can kill. Herein lies one major difference between the historical American public schoolteacher and Abbey’s. Teachers should not kill, we think. For Abbey, the elements of nature are only powerful teachers in their capacity to be completely disinterested in human existence. Abbey’s teacher is so concerned with the truth, that she is utterly impartial to the thoughts of man. The sun is the most serious teacher there is.

To be drowned in sunlight such that we cannot see anything manmade. This metaphor seems to make instinctual sense, because vision is often central in experiencing, and we know sight to be easily influenced by light. After all, we only see when a light is “on.” Otherwise, we flounder around in space, not able to find or grasp anything for certain. We may run into a table or knock over a vase, but we would not be able to tell for certain what that was, because manmade objects rely on a plane of existence that can be “read” by the eyes of man. Even the concepts in our mind are actualized by visual standards such as words and pictures. If the manmade light is turned off, or the overly bright sun obscures our fallible eyesight, we can no longer rely on what was built by sight to maintain any such dialogue with us. Plato makes use of this common metaphor in the Allegory of the Cave. The sunlight outside the cave blinds the philosopher-king at first, until he or she learns to “see the truth” instead of simple manmade objects (that may deceive) by transforming his or her senses to comply with reality.
Socrates’s seemingly antagonistic discussion style in Plato’s dialogues is a teaching tool not unlike the sun’s method of pure neutrality. To get at the truth, the point after *aporia*, after blindness and blankness, some brashness and prying at man’s soul is necessary. Accordingly, we can read in Abbey’s sunlight passage a description of an aesthetic experience akin to *aporia* before truth seeking. Abbey is just beginning to transform into an active learner while in weather.

Another unique feature of Abbey’s philosophy of learning is that he focuses on the sun as something not merely for the eyes, but as a revealing multisensory aesthetic. Overwhelming basic sight with light requires humans to adapt to a non-vision-based relationship with the world, and it can refresh other sensory connections we make, while distancing us from the usual assumptions we make via vision. When bright light removes the presumptive powers of vision, humans can no longer immediately take the images of manmade objects for granted. We “see” much more than what is in front of us, because one sense (vision) is no longer in command. Abbey is not talking about a single candle or spotlight in the room, but rather, an overarching, dominating feeling of brilliant and pure light. This is not something that can be turned on or off with a switch; it is an atmospheric condition of the sun. (The theme of blinding light appears repeatedly in *Desert Solitaire*. For this reason, we shall also return to it again in the subsection “Clarity and Drugs.”)

In much the same way as Abbey describes the sun as an extended conversation on water, he also describes moonlight in terms of its relationship to sunlight. Note the crossover, with what follows, between the adjectives “light,” “reflected,” and “illuminated” (as in “brilliant”):

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126 See Holland for an analysis of the impact of the sun in Plato’s *Phaedrus*. 

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In the mixture of \textit{starlight} and \textit{cloud-reflected sunlight} in which the desert world is now \textit{illuminated}, each single object stands forth in preternatural though transient brilliance, a final assertion of existence before the coming of night: each rock and shrub and tree, each flower, each stem of grass, diverse and separate, vividly isolate, yet joined each to every other in a unity which generously includes me and my solitude as well.

Or so it seems at the moment, as my fire dies to a twist of smoke and a heap of rubies, and for a moment I think I’ve almost caught a falling star: there is no mystery; there is only paradox, the incontrovertible union of contradictory truths. A falling star which melts into a vapor as I grasp it, which flows through my fingers like water, like smoke. (99, emphasis added)

It “flows through my fingers like water,” Abbey writes, and we understand now from our analysis of his extended metaphors of the sun that water is a precious and impossible commodity in the desert, an impossible reward. This is quite possibly my favorite passage in all of my research. We witness Abbey explicitly learning now: he is beginning to recognize more clearly what he is gaining, and how he is growing under the sun. We can see this elsewhere in the text when Abbey says frankly that: “…[his position as a Ranger allows] a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back; the discovery of something intimate – though impossible to name – in the remote” (39).\textsuperscript{127} He recognizes how “vaporous” these lessons are: as life giving as water but as dissipating as smoke. He is “discovering something intimate – though impossible to name.” He is coming to the realization that an aesthetic feeling is a graceful brush with a new sort of knowledge. For someone as well read as Abbey (a young Master’s graduate who secured a government job with no credentials beyond book-learning) his literary embrace of aesthetic experience’s learning value is fundamental.

\textsuperscript{127} One might also note here that his position title as “Ranger” reflects his word choice of “thought and feeling” that “range” a space and time, as Abbey himself roams the park. His mind/body span all acceptable room to the borderlands of the remote. When one part of his physicality moves, he finds the rest of his being attached. The reference to intimacy also relates back to the discussion in Chapter IV.
Alpenglow and Limelight

First, the sun does not have just one straight, flat setting – bright - like a building’s fluorescent lighting system. It changes like an amorphous mass: elusive one moment, or stingingly bold, or the origin of another type of light altogether, not merely sunlight anymore. I have experienced two types of atmospheric phenomena that I replay in my mind’s eye as I read these nature writings. I remember camping a night in the Ansel Adams Wilderness of California during my 2012 John Muir Trail solo thru-hike. I had staked my tent into the dusty puce dirt under a canopy of stunted pitch pines. From the rock outcropping outside my tent vestibule something nuclear was happening to the air. The sky was emblazoned in a florid light over the mountains, a result of the pure summit air meeting the hot, sleepy sun. I bore witness to the most literal alpenglow.

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128 This formatting change and similar ones throughout Chapters V and VI indicate a passage from the journal that I kept while reading or rereading the selected texts for this research. The photographs are my own, meant to accompany the vignettes.

129 John Muir sees alpenglow in the Sierras and says about it that the “peaks were inspired with the ineffable beauty of the alpenglow, and a solemn, awful stillness hushed everything in the landscape,” 121-122.
Second, I don’t know it to have any name, but I have been outside often before or after a storm when the ground – not the sky – seems radioactively aglow. I remember seeing this atmospheric phenomenon over the Patagonian pampa, when crepuscular rays spotlight the earth, illuminating an emanating, pulsating lime green base, and I have seen it over the tall grass prairie fields behind my parents’ homestead property in western Minnesota. It seems as if the nitrogen, ripe in the air, has caused the grass to burst into citrus flames. It used to be the case in theaters that a performance could be bathed in an intense white light by heating a cylinder of lime, viz. “limelight.” I humor myself with the thought that the phrase “in the limelight” in fact originates in the experience of traversing land ablaze in this ground-glow.

Listening for Music

While viewing a phenomenon of light it is not uncommon to feel a sense that its eerie bands of color are “calling” out, almost like a voice or song seeping note by note from the sky, especially when the light is so dense that you cannot notice anything else. Think of moments walking out of a building into the “blinding light,” so pervasive that you cannot move or think about anything contrary in the moment. It is the same feeling as someone blasting their stereo
early in the morning, or a cacophony of bird songs right through your window and into your ear like a rude alarm. Abbey describes this repeatedly in Desert Solitaire as the sun’s “music,” saying, “June in the desert. The sun roars down from its track in space with a savage and holy light, a fantastic music in the mind (82).” Abbey’s novel ontological metaphor here is that the sun’s light descending is music in the mind. What could “music in the mind” mean? I think here of Zwicky’s claim that philosophy is lyric; that is, our best thoughts must flow like music. If, music is a lyrical philosophy brought to mind, Abbey is suggesting with this metaphor that the sun can stimulate the best philosophy. Music is not a literal song with words but rather a feeling emanating from the “savage and holy” sunlight that alights lyrical ideas.

Abbey holds true to this metaphor fifty pages later. Although he seems to treat the sun as a horrible, “savage” character on his landscape, he respects it nonetheless, and looks on it contemplatively. After living in the park and under the sun for a few months, Abbey even admits that he has learned to listen for the sun’s music:

I listen for signals from the sun – but that distant music is too high and pure for the human ear. I gaze at the tree and receive no response. I scrape my bare feet against the sand and rock under the table and am comforted by their solidity and resistance. I look at the cloud. (136)

He is looking for a response from the sun, or at least something that the weather can tell him, but he is getting nothing in return. Instead, to console himself and his curiosity, he deflects his attention to the things that do answer back to him: the sand under his toes and the cloud in the sky. That is not to say, however, that the sun does not have an answer ever for Abbey, only that he looks to it often but finds that many times it evades his questioning gaze. Why won’t the sun sing? Abbey says that he suspects that the physical form is how things in nature communicate with man, since that is the only shared language we have (27). With that said, Abbey could not
have been expecting the sun to “sing” per se. He wanted it to show him something physical. I do not suppose that the spiritual, but fervently non-religious Abbey would call the sun’s music a “sign from God,” but we might imagine the physical response to look somewhat similar to that. Perhaps Abbey is looking for a ray of light, or event something much more subtle, like for his attention to be drawn to the halo-lit outline of a bush on the horizon that sparks another idea. It is likely that the sun’s music is a physical representation for Abbey such as how what intellectualists read in books inspires them. Sometimes it is not being actually told something aloud that matters, but rather a physical representation of an idea that is sensed from shared physical presence. The sun is there, Abbey is there, and therefore they can communicate, albeit nonverbally. The example that Abbey offers is his repeated “conversations” with the juniper tree near his Ranger station/trailer.

Again, Abbey knows that the sun’s language is nonhuman, intangible, but he seeks it anyway. Why? Herein is the crux of my question about outdoors learners in general. What could make someone want to live outside, without more shelter than a thin sheet of tarp, or hike for months on end alone? I think Abbey is driven to listen by the same drive that sparks a through-hiker to go on trail, sparks a researcher to collect data, or sparks a child to sit in excitement before a school day lesson. Humans can often feel when transformative learning is nigh, when we are on the cusp of some important knowledge. Abbey has an ear for the sun’s music now, and he is straining to hear it. He has become so dedicatedly studious that he sees the sun’s voice as a vocational calling, almost expecting the music to come to him like the voice of God (i.e., the sun, “disembodied intelligence”):

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130 Willa Cather narrates in My Antonia: “We left the classroom quietly, conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling,” 198. This illuminating quote is featured again in my next chapter.
… [In] the secretive little side canyons I half expect to see not only the cottonwood tree rising over its tiny spring – the leafy god, the desert’s liquid eye\(^{131}\) – but also a rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence, \textit{about to speak my name}.

If a man’s imagination were not so weak, so easily tired, if his capacity for wonder not so limited, he would abandon forever such fantasies of the supernal. He would learn to perceive in water, leaves and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and marvelous, more than enough to console him for the loss of the ancient dreams. (176, original emphasis)

Months into his desert season, Abbey is on the brink of finding what I hope to find in this study, but he does not quite make it to the conclusion. He says that man ought to “learn to perceive in water, leaves and silence more than is sufficient of the absolute and marvelous.” His use of “learn” here is another interesting word choice, since it is true that humans need to learn methods of taking in knowledge, for example, when listening or note-taking. Abbey’s research indicates that the type of listening he takes himself to be doing is a learning how to perceive aesthetic experience in nature.

The absolute and marvelous that he speaks of is philosophical truth, I believe; what is “more than enough to console” our dreams about answers to our greatest questions. Abbey is coming to know transformative aesthetic learning, but I think he is saying quite blatant weather words without still being able to synthesize weather itself as the provocative feature (like Socrates and afternoon sun in the \textit{Phaedrus}). He becomes more aware of this explicit connection between learning and weather as the book unfolds. Abbey’s initial obliviousness is a critique that could be launched for a great many of our nature writers here, although it is simply sufficient that they recognize the outdoor aesthetic experience at all. I will take the responsibility of demonstrating just how obviously weather-centric their observations of this aesthetic are, and

\(^{131}\) In the desert, cottonwood trees can only grow next to reliable water sources.
therefore, why we must step forward to propose a philosophy of weather learning, grounded first in their hard work documenting such moments. There are times that Abbey does come close to this thesis, though. He comes into his aesthetic senses by noting that there is “something in the air:”

Something strange in the air. I go to the weather stations and check the instruments – nothing much, actually, but a rain gauge, an anemometer or wind gauge, and a set of thermometers which record the lows and highs for the day. The little cups on the wind gauge are barely turning, but this breath of air, such as it is, comes from the southwest. The temperature is fifty-five or so, after a low this morning of thirty-eight. It is not going to snow after all. Balanced on a point of equilibrium, hesitating, the world of the high desert turns toward summer. (38)

Abbey is noticing the “strangeness in the air” and he is racing to investigate what his body could tell him yet his instruments could not. Abbey knows that he is sensing something beyond simple-structured knowledge, again, a philosophy more attuned to lyrics than systems. He has noticed that the weather has actually stabilized, and one cannot help at this moment feel a tinge of pride that Abbey has come to know his world there so well that he can sense the very moment of the turn from winter into summer. He has discovered what ages of Native American healers and land-workers have already known – that there is a skill to sensing weather in the earth that goes beyond our common knowledge set. That is because this skill is a form of physical learning that we have not yet acknowledged exists, nonetheless researched. Abbey’s hesitation shows that he is at the early stages of acquiring this ancient way of knowing the non-human environment.

Clarity & Drugs

The wind will not stop. Gusts of sand swirl before me, stinging my face. But there is still too much to see and marvel at, the world very much alive in the bright light and wind, exultant with the fever of spring, the delight of morning. Strolling on, it
seems to me that the strangeness and wonder of existence are emphasized here, in the desert, by the comparative sparsity of flora and fauna: life not crowded upon life as in other places but scattered abroad in sparseness and simplicity, with a generous gift of space for each herb and bush and tree, each stem of grass, so that the living organism stands out bold and brave and vivid against the lifeless sand and barren rock. The extreme clarity of the desert light is equaled by the extreme individuation of desert life-forms. Love flowers best in openness and freedom. (26, emphasis added)

Abbey tolerates the discomfort of the heat and wind in his face, because the world seems “lit up” just for him. In his “alive” state, he philosophizes about the placement of the plants, and generalizes his observations to a wider analogy of the world. And he notes the “extreme clarity of the desert light” (the sun) that gives shape to each individual living object on the earth before him. The world is “alive in the bright light.” Then, seemingly out of thin air, he declares that in “the extreme clarity of the desert light” he has learned that “love flowers best in openness and freedom.” Love? I cannot hide my puzzlement at this claim. How did Abbey make the leap to love flowering in a desert? It appears to be such an offhand statement, an afterthought, yet we know Abbey by now to be anything but careless with his observations.

In the sunlight, each living object takes on its own whole shape and form, each with its own shadows and atmospheric space. The crisp sunlight allows each creature and plant to be fully seen. This witnessing is care – it is love. Love, after all, is the opportunity to be witnessed as a living thing, a creature, and a relative in the world family, a person. It is like saying, “There you are! I see you.” The sunlight highlights the space each object needs for life; therefore, the sun is showing Abbey what love requires, even though the weather, the sun itself, is non-loving.

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132 Noddings, 219.

With all this talk of love, let us now return to the “rational” argument. The aesthetic experience outdoors that Edward Abbey articulates appears, by his writing, to have a haphazard, spontaneous quality to it, as if it can only happen in a free moment. It seems nebulous and wild, unordered, and unsolicited. But this cannot be the case. Transformative learning does not just happen; it is groomed and encouraged through freeform but intelligent means.\footnote{Mezirow, 2000, 21.} There is a certain degree to which all experience is a form of learning indirectly by the environment, but intelligent learning, the type that I would argue transforms us, requires a measure of intelligence.\footnote{Dewey, \textit{Democracy and Education}, 19.} This does not always need to materialize in the pedagogical planning or a directed curriculum, as teachable moments are available at any time, but it does demand some sense of secondary experience or reflection going hand in hand with primary experience (as explained in Chapter I, the active and passive elements combined according to Dewey.\footnote{Ibid., 139. See also Dewey, \textit{Experience and Nature}, 15-17.}

Abbay is taking a theoretical and educational thought experiment and making it robust philosophy by distinguishing this experience he is having as in part, traditionally Kantian and Stoic (in regards to its opinion of the sublime and nature, respectively), and fastidiously original.

Men come and go, cities rise and fall… the earth remains, slightly modified…Turning Plato and Hegel on their heads I sometimes choose to think, no doubt perversely, that man is a dream, thought an illusion, and only rock is real. Rock and sun.

Under the desert sun, in that dogmatic clarity, the fables of theology and the myths of classical philosophy dissolve like mist. The air is clean, the rock cuts cruelly into flesh; shatter the rock and the odor of flint rises to your nostrils, bitter and sharp. Whirlwinds dance across the salt flats, a pillar of dust by day; the thornbush breaks into flame at night. What does it mean? It means nothing. It is as
it is and has no need for meaning. The desert lies beneath and soars beyond any possible human qualification. Therefore, sublime (194).

As if to drive in the point of burgeoning consciousness of weather, Abbey invokes the elements as teacher again (e.g., “under the desert sun,” “clarity,” “mist,” “air,” “wind”). Even in the paragraph directly following this passage, Abbey starts with the words “the sun.” He is becoming more and more explicit.

The clarity of the elements (the sun for Abbey) and the experience under the elements’ dominion (anywhere out-of-doors) can be described as nothing less than a stimulant drug:

Dehydration: the desert air sucks moisture from my every pore. I take a drink from the canvas water-bag dangling near my head, the water cooled by evaporation. Noontime here is like a drug. The light is psychedelic, the dry electric air narcotic. To me the desert is stimulating, exciting, exacting; I feel no temptation to sleep or to relax into occult dreams but rather an opposite effect which sharpens and heightens vision, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Each stone, each plant, each grain of sand exists in and for itself with a clarity that is undimmed by any suggestion of a different realm. Claritas, integritas, veritas. Only sunlight holds things together. Noon is the crucial hour: the desert reveals itself nakedly and cruelly, with no meaning but its own existence… A single cloud floats in the sky to the northeast, motionless, a magical calescence of vapor where a few minutes before there was nothing visible but the hot, deep, black-grained blueness of infinity… Life has come to a standstill, at least for the hour… temporarily free from the force of motion and process and the surge toward – what? Something called the future? I am free, I am compelled, to contemplate the world which underlies life, struggle, thought, ideas, the human labyrinth of hope and despair (135).

“Noontime here is like a drug.” What does this mean, presently? Take out the analogy and phrase it as a metaphor, which we see in the next sentence: “The light is psychedelic, the dry electric air narcotic.” Now here is something metaphorically grounded, ripe with information. Our comparison is noon = drug, and by this, we know that Abbey means that the noontime sun is like (or is, metaphorically) a drug. Then he explains further that the “light is psychedelic” and the
“dry, electric, air is narcotic.” This gives us a great deal of information about his experience in the afternoons. What are things that we can relate to that are “psychedelic” or “narcotic?” This is where we begin.

I had my wisdom teeth surgically removed many years ago, which I understand to be a relatively common occurrence for adults these days. So let us together recall an experience of that sort: waking up and out of surgery, in a white room, mouth stuffed with cotton, throat dry to the bone, fingers immobile, only eyes on the prowl as the anesthetic wears off. The brightness is revoltingly intense, as if you have just awakened after what you expected to be a long, permanent death. Shapes move and rotate, although you know things to be stably placed. Things begin as bright but blurry, then as you rouse, they become intensely clear. Your environment is white and simple, perhaps a recovery room, and each object is vividly present. Psychedelic, indeed, yet your brain is still extraordinarily functional. Things seem psychedelic in that you feel strangely like you are “split” from that moment, but also the light is rousing, so you know yourself to not be entirely unconscious.

The dry, electric air is narcotic. Now this requires some further pause. It can be easy to think of drugs as tools that take us out of reality, but Abbey is telling us that the noontime light is making him sharper, brighter, like the displayed objects around him. I see this as an extended metaphor: in order to understand where he is going with the drug-alias, we have to understand that he is first dehydrated. “The desert air sucks moisture from my every pore.” This is, in and of itself, a sort of drug-induced state, because in dehydration our bodies rely on core nutrient elements to retain functionality. In our process to pull out whatever water remains, we become lethargic, sleepy, disoriented: many of the characteristics one might have of a drugged state, but certainly not one of being heightened like Abbey is describing. That is, this is how people
describe themselves while still partially hydrated...Take it a step further, to the sort of massive and all-encompassing thirst that Abbey notes, and one’s neural connections begin firing more rapidly and hormonal responses kick in, which results in nothing less than a hyper-stimulation. This – not a second earlier – is where Abbey must reside. The light, so bright that at first it may blur out everything, blind us, when our rods and cones settle, they are indeed functioning at a higher visual state. Not only is Abbey seeing something vividly anew, his physical body is supporting these existential conclusions. The air feels electric to Abbey, perhaps because his heart is beating slower, possibly causing him to feel the very pulse of his blood as if it is electricity rising up in him. Does science ruin this learning experience? Certainly not! In fact, it stands to support Abbey’s learning, evidencing what Abbey can only notice and describe without fully understanding. It is a marvel of the human body that the conscious self, brain, and body can so fully commit to the environment holding it.

Abbey says also that the sun “holds things together.” We cannot so easily see science stepping in here, as if the light is melting objective molecules together, but that need not matter. Abbey, remember, is focusing on the brightness of the sun, the intensity of the light being like a stimulant drug. Without a bright enough light, none of the details and hypersensitivity and hyper-vision that Abbey is citing could be in play. Imagine a dim light instead in this scenario, like a sunset, with shadows cast all over the desert, obscuring sides of objects in ruddy shadows. It is obvious that only with light that is completely, utterly white could Abbey’s sight be as sharp as it is, leading him to say that the noontime is the time of “clarity, integrity, truth.” The desert sun has “lit up” the earth such that Abbey feels he can suddenly see it as it never was seen before – totally exposed, totally visible, totally there to be witnessed. Through clear light Abbey receives an honest display of the desert, and through this integral display, a truthful sight materializes.
The truth (as in the reality he that he sees) at noontime is the simple truth that these other things around him exist. But what a powerful philosophical deduction this is to feel in full force, with one’s body 100-percent involved in the exposure. Other than one cloud, everything in front of Abbey and behind Abbey is frozen or in slow motion, allowing him to examine it all. The sun is altering his sense of time, just like a drug, giving him the opportunity to ignore the minutes and focus on contemplating the microseconds long enough to see them as they are.

The Vacant Lot, or A Zenith

I have felt, like Abbey, the ache of change, the shift of transformative growth outdoors. I like to think of this, quaintly, as my earliest memory, to the point that I have come to assume it is so, but it must have been scrambled one day in the recesses of my brain. Perhaps it came to be so via its importance rather than factual history, because now I realize that I must have been at the very least four or five years old when it happened (not so early). To be truthful, I am not even
sure if it is a memory of a single moment, or rather what I have consolidated from several childhood seasons.

When I was young, my family had a split-level home on a nice yard, where my dad and his brother had once grown up, at the end of a sullen and forgotten cul-de-sac, at the end of a dying factory town. Our neighbors were the Helgesons, a lively retired couple with long-gone kids, the Affields to our left at the court entrance, who minded themselves and kept a neat and bounded home, and a vacant, hedge-rimmed lot kitty-corner to ours and adjacent to the Helgeson’s that later in my youth became the elderly Christianson couple’s new building site. But before it was theirs, I had staked my claim, occupied by a small homestead that I had constructed in my dreams.

The round, paved bulb of the cul-de-sac road pointed to the north and to an empty golf course driving range now engulfed in the weeds and prairie grasses that are attracted to disturbed but relatively abandoned plots of land. Besides the seasonal mowing by the golf course staff to keep the ticks and mice out and the unused area “presentable,” the grasses were left entirely to their devices. My parents tell me of the days when the golf course was booming, and my grandmother complained of the golf balls hitting the side of her new house and windows. Even twenty years later, I could still find an errant ball or two nestled in our yard near my bedroom window, the same room from where my boy father must have watched the golfers practice.

On the Red River, the natural border of Minnesota (my dad’s land) and North Dakota (my mom’s), just a few hundred yards off the backend of Christianson’s lot, the seasons are always defined. Winter is cold, summer is hot, and spring and fall transition with rain and leaves. I was in the vacant lot in every season. My mom would send us out of the house when the
air was stiff inside and the open windows alone could not do our lungs justice, and my brother David, just a year and a breath older than me, would tow me in our red wagon into the infinite nothingness of the grassy lot. I thought I was running away from home with David to live off the earth and to never return indoors. (Only as an adult, telling this story to my mom, did she point out that both us kids were always within easy eye and earshot from the second-story living room window where she sat and watched afternoon Days of Our Lives and stitched curtains and dresses.) We would sneak Saltine crackers, sandwich meat, and Poptarts “for the road” from the lazy-Susan tucked in the back corner of the kitchen – an easy reach for child hands – and take off at a run with the loaded wagon, lest we be caught snatching provisions meant for family meals.

David and I would always begin at first by the wagon and the cul-de-sac, talking about building shelters and hiding from Mom, but then David would grow restless and want to play hide and seek in the grass (without me) and suddenly disappear without warning. To retaliate, I would grab the blueberry Poptarts (his favorite) and run to the opposite end of the lot, tripping over the long grasses as they bent and stretched and swayed like dry corn stalks after harvest. One after another would pop up in front of me, towering cream breakers of four or five feet tall, and I would dive into one with my whole body, arms and legs getting scraped by the stalks like tiny elephant grass blades, and my face pelted with a thousand tiny grain-like and whiskered seeds that twitched and lurched off the tips of each blade. Barley-shaped seeds dusted my fine blonde hair, and I would roll and collapse on my back on top of the wreckage of blades and seeds, exhausted but exhilarated by the challenge of traversing the prairie on my bruised up little legs, like the wagon wheels once rolled through the West.

There, on my back, cradled in the wild grasses that swept up like towering walls around me, the faded Plains sky tunneled straight from my chest and up and over my grass fortress like
liquid bubbling up from a fountain, the wisps of clouds like froth on the water. The cloudwork above mirrored the prairie field, but was an even whiter field, that blinded me with an alabaster sheen, and which moved and swirled with the wind in beat with my wild strands of hair. The sky was so far away yet the exact image of the earth, reflected, and I pondered it as if it were the future.

I feel so strongly, even now as I record this, a sense of wholeness of being in that moment, wrapped up in a paradoxical joyful-loneliness. The plants bent up and over me to tell the grassy clouds, through quakes and susurrations, some deep and important prophecy and, being uninvited to their tête-à-tête, a strange ache began to spread across skin and in joints too young for arthritis. I can only suppose that it was my first feeling of learning: the ripping and regenerating of my perspectives evolving from a child’s to a woman’s. I understood in merely the faintest way then that I was changing into something incrementally more “me,” not my parents’ or David’s but my own self. I felt as if only I in the entire universe could feel as a stalk of Indian bluegrass crackling and shuddering in the wind. I was strangely comforted with my changing persona yet broken by it. In protest for the secrecy and empathetic pain, I too offered a telling, and foretold the harsh day in the fall when the mowers would cut these grasses away, and the mice would run for cover, but I would not be able to hide away anymore. A bittersweet premonition.

Alone-ness

Fans of the genre of nature writing are no strangers to the topic of alone-ness outdoors, including its many finely tuned synonyms: solitude, solitary, loneliness, retreat, remoteness, seclusion, isolation, loneness, distance, and desolation. Unlike Thoreau, whom we will later find
claims a sort of retreat in nature, a transcendental move inward by walking outward, Abbey embraces the dark and empty-sounding qualities of alone-ness, similar to my experience brooding in the vacant lot. He hears the music of the sun as distant, requiring his wanton studiousness to seek, and finds a nostalgic and beautifully aching philosophical lesson within that search. In a world where the dark qualities of depression, loneliness, fear, and shame are hidden, Abbey draws them forward to reflect on himself. The desert, obviously, is a great example of those feelings incarnate in nature, but it is not just in desert regions that we can find ourselves sunk into this morose position, and I posit that it is not the person him or herself that takes the mind and body directly to such a state. Abbey seems to recognize this too. He finds the link of the glaring sunlight to the incitation of these reflective feelings. Moreover, the feelings of alone-ness, even in their darkest state, do not sink him into solipsism, because he sees a lesson on the horizon (97). Abbey uses this state of alone-ness to philosophize his role in the world and the human condition.

Learning does not need to be a pleasant experience in the moment. Indeed, pain, labor or yearning often lead to transformation. And sometimes the lesson that we learn is disagreeable and unsettling, brutal even – especially when it is a personal critique. Abbey thinks that the harshest of lessons we must learn is the relationship between humans and nonhumans. “All men are brothers, we like to say, half-wishing sometimes in secret it were not true. But perhaps it is true. And is the evolutionary line from protozoan to Spinoza any less certain? That also may be true. We are obliged, therefore, to spread the news, painful and bitter though it may be for some to hear, that all living things on earth are kindred” (21).

Even more frightening than hearing a critique of our worldview is the experience of being forced into such a reality with one’s whole body. It is one thing to be told something in a “safe
space” where we are sheltered from all other inconveniences and so have only one idea to tackle at a time, it is quite another experience to be fully exposed, mentally and physically to a non-human force like the weather.

Hot and tired I stop in the shade of an overhanging ledge and take a drink from my canteen. Resting, I listen to the deep dead stillness of the canyon. No wind or breeze, no birds, no running water, no sound of any kind but the stir of my own breathing.

Alone in the silence, I understand for a moment the dread which many feel in the presence of primeval desert, the unconscious fear which compels them to tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions. Anything rather than confront directly the antehuman, that other world which frightens not through danger or hostility but in something far worse – its implacable indifference.

Out of the shade, into the heat. I tramp on through the winding gorge, through the harsh brittle silence. In this arid atmosphere sounds do not fade, echo or die softly but are extinguished suddenly, sharply, without the slightest hint of reverberation. The clash of rock against rock is like a shot – abrupt, exaggerated, toneless. (191)

I must agree with Abbey, that what humans fear most from the non-artificial environment is the pure indifference of it toward us. We are not nature’s masters, as we so often strive to be. Nor are we unbent by it. We like to think that we are apart from it, safe from things like the elements and their force, yet we make daily choices in respect to what the non-human environment dictates: in our clothing, in our transit plans, in our social outings, in our mood. For the most part we can even ignore this unintentional force it places on us, or we can curse the weather like we might the frustrating car in front of us in rush hour or the rain that seems to fall just as we are stepping out of the house. What Abbey learns in the silence is that others must feel this dread constantly, subconsciously, when they imagine being alone in such a place as he is. Otherness is frightening, especially if it exists entirely independent of humans. Being alone outdoors is fearful to us, because it is then that we must eventually become fully aware of the fact that we as a species
must acknowledge the Copernican Revolution, that we are not the center of this universe, or even the center of this world. Thus, the alone-ness imposes an unsettling silence that leaves us only with the fears voiced aloud in our heads, our own voices that aggravate us by telling us the truth for once. The soundlessness in the desert canyon is as abrupt as the shrill “shot of truth” in our minds.

One contextual piece of information about this passage is missing from the quote that I have selected. Namely, Abbey only found his way to that isolated canyon by pursuing some unrelated task. He was hiking to a destination at that time. Getting to the destination proved, over time, to matter little and eventually was remembered by Abbey only as some afterthought. The learning came in his aesthetic experiences along the hike in pockets of time that he had not planned out. The question is, how does this figure into my philosophy of learning in weather? How important is the ground-laying curriculum or intentional direction in this type of transformative learning experience? Discussions with David Hansen have given me an excellent answer to work with. He says, “We don’t stomp our feet up and down, staying in place.” Any movement, any exposure, any choice of environment begins with some sort of action on our part. The transformative aesthetic learning experience that Abbey has might have just as well occurred if he had chosen to stay with his raft on the river rather than docking for a brief hike. However, the point is that there is always some agency involved in human growth, and some intelligence needed to digest aesthetic experiences and reflect upon them as being meaningful, although they need not be scripted lessons. In fact, it is possible that they cannot be scripted at all, only waited and watched for, grasped swiftly when they do transpire.

Returning to the talk of “shots,” Abbey does do plenty of drinking and thinking while out alone at his desert post. But the drinking aside, his thinking comes back around again many times
to this same place, an oscillation between the fear of being alone and the comfort of alone-ness.

In a later passage he answers our probing questions with beautiful clarity. I quote this in full, because it shows the important progression of his thoughts from a dark and foreboding place to one of peace and comfort with his human habitation in the non-human world:

Once the drink is mixed, however, I always go outside, out in the light and the air and the space and the breeze, to enjoy it. Making the best of both worlds, that’s the thing. But how, you might ask, does living outdoors on the terrace enable me to escape that other form of isolation, the solitary confinement of the mind? For there are the bad moments, or were, especially in the beginning of my life here, when I would sit down at the table for supper inside the house trailer and discover with a sudden shock that I was alone. There was nobody, nobody at all, on the other side of the table. Alone-ness became loneliness and the sensation was strong enough to remind me (how could I have forgotten?) that the one thing better than solitude, the only thing better than solitude, is society. By society I do not mean the roar of city streets or the cultured and cultural talk of the schoolmen (reach for your revolver!) or human life in general. I mean the society of a friend or friends or a good, friendly woman…But taking my meal outside by the burning juniper in the fireplace with more desert and mountains than I could explore in a lifetime open to view, I was invited to contemplate a far larger world, one which extends into a past and into a future without any limits known to the human kind. By taking off my shoes and digging my toes in the sand I made contact with the larger world – an exhilarating feeling which leads to equanimity. Certainly I was still by myself, so to speak – there were no other people around and there still are none – but in the midst of such a grand tableau it was impossible to give full and serious consideration to Albuquerque. All that is human melted with the sky and faded out beyond the mountains and I felt, as I feel – is it a paradox? – that a man can never find or need better companionship than that of himself. (96, original emphasis)

Here we can see that alone-ness is not loneliness, and that while outdoors we are forced to straddle the line between society and the individual, and undulate constantly in the feelings of fear and comfort. This is itself the perfect definition of an effective learning environment. Abbey does not need to feel at home outdoors, because being there and reflecting on his presence there is an example of the process of Abbey actively learning; it is not about the race for mankind’s progress or about the process of answering definitely an ancient question. Abbey is answering
his own questions loosely, fluidly, and meaningfully, as he waits off a sweltering noon hour or enjoys a nightcap with an eye on the horizon at the end of the day. Equanimity, strangely, has occurred to him, perhaps finally made sense to him, when there is no one else around.

The Badlands

I have one of these unsettling memories that sometimes I am convinced never happened, yet other times I think I must be getting the story wrong, or I am frustrated that it seems I am convinced it is true but that I have grasped it incompletely. Then there are days like today that it is perfectly vivid in its story line – I know where I went, I can remember the shapes of the rocks and the curves of the empty roads I walked, but I have no idea how much time passed. Or there is another day where all I can bring to mind is the overwhelming feeling of how real the air was, or the sky, or my skin, but it is like I have lost a sense in the memory – maybe scent or hearing has gone, another time maybe it is my eyesight. What a nebulous creature, this memory! And because of its shape shifting, I hesitate to try to write it. What if I get it wrong? Do I even have it right in the first place? I think I have concluded now that it is worthy due to the fact that it is. It is an incessant memory, flicking in and out of my life like light switches turned on and off.

I have a feel today for the character of aloneness in this memory, and as it shares an affinity to Abbey’s Desert Solitaire, I will say more. I lived for a couple years in south central South Dakota, an area distinctly solitary (at least that was the feeling I interpreted from my experiences there). But just two or so hours west, Badlands National Park took the award for the most remote imaginable space. I was planning at that time to do a large section hike of the Appalachian Trail on the East Coast and needed some serious training days in advance of that trek, so I chose a stint out in the Badlands a time or two on my own.
I must have driven out there early that morning, but I do not remember that part. I also am deaf at the empty northern parking lot where the memory seems to “begin.” I put my itinerary and emergency numbers on the dashboard for the rangers, lock my Vibe and sling my waterlogged pack over my shoulder. I unfold my hiking poles and give my boots a once-over look. Then there is a gap in time. I somehow get to a trailhead and register so that they (who?) can find me if I disappear. I notice no one has taken this trail yet this spring, and I feel the usual wave of dread and reckoning as I realize I am the only one here. Of course, that is only rational, and it is the necessary step I take toward appreciating my time alone. I know what I am doing out there.

Another gap in time and description. I am wading through a foot of icy marsh water that has collected on the plains after snowmelt. It makes it feel as though I am off trail, so I respectfully pay close attention to the 100-yard distant metal poles marking my way. Bison graze in a col shadowed by a sandy plateau, and the sun has already cast rust rays onto the canyons as if it is sunset, but I have to think it was only early afternoon by then. There is some lavender
blended into the rock walls that catches my eye, because it looks warm to touch against the cool backdrop of a wet spring day.

Gap. The lavender and red colors disappear and the whole canyon I am in has snapped into a tart green light. The air is sharply charged, and my nose hairs sting slightly, a sure sign that I have entered a dry front at the head of a lightning storm. It is a long, flat horizon, so I can see the mob rolling and curdling miles away. It is promising to be a mighty mess. There is not much one can do when caught in the rain, other than find comfort in being something other than a witch of Oz that will shrivel up in water. I was wet already from the flooded trail, so why not be soaked through? Worse things could happen, and most of those things could yet be prevented. But I would get wet, like every last dust pile pooled onto this arid rock, every exposed lizard and errant cow. “Phew, here it comes,” I whisper. I race to get out of the canyon and down to the paved road that circled the park. “I can’t get turned around out here if the lights go out.” I would track the road the many miles around to my car, to be safe. The ranger’s station was on its way, just in case, but I knew well that after 4 pm the whole park would be cleared out. The ranger on shift would not stay a minute past 4:15 pm. After all, why? No one is here anyway.

I do not suppose that it ever occurred to me that I would be caught in a deluge in the one expanse of land named for having zero water sources. Badlands = bad land to live on = no water, right? Apparently not for me. I had buckets of water in my shoes, bags of water in my backpack, and barrels of water dumped on my head. Weirdly, it was marvelous, and I was wildly ecstatic in that moment. My vision became a blur, but I felt my heart still throbbing with excitement. Tripping my way down a rock slide cut into a valley of Indian grass, I slipped once and my hiking pole caught my foot as it shot out over the edge of a steep cliff. The memory cuts out suddenly, but I could not have blacked out.
When the memory comes back, it is a violent affront, and it smacks me so deeply into the moment that I shift into the present tense recalling it. Memory rushes back with a flush of heat over my body as I realize how serious a misstep like mine just that moment ago is when I am on my own. Now I am sweating, as saturated on the inside as the outside, and the feeling of panic creeps up from my esophagus and I force the rain to push it right back down my throat.

I am trail running by the time the road comes into sight, and when my feet touch the slick pavement I have the strange memory of stopping and just standing there. What was I expecting, car on the road? A burst of applause? There is a clap of lightning that cracks right over my head that jolts the grin right off my face. “Serves me right!” I snort. And it is black, such a thick and smoky daylight without the “light.” The sky is bruised so inky violet-navy that all but the closest rock walls are mush under it, and the road smells like the sweat running out of its dirty rock-locked pores. I smell no better... and it is comical to me how aware I was then of my nervous aura. After all, no one was there to notice. Did I imagine the rocks were judging me?


Alone. The perfect summary of my next few miles and hours back to the parking lot. I ached, I cried, I laughed, I marveled, I worried. It was like I was exploding with every pop of
thunder. It is nothing but gaps of time in my memory – a sound here or there, a muscle twitch, a headache, a salty rock particle caught on my upper lip, mixed with raindrops and rolling down to the corners of my mouth. I do not remember returning to my car about 6pm. I do, however, remember being surprised to be there. I had expected to be alone forever, and my car must have shocked me like a wormhole above the metal bleachers in Times Square. I think I could have been trapped in that experience forever, yet I was racing to escape. I may still be out there.

Abbey’s Haunting

Somnolence – a heaviness in the air, a chill in the sunlight, an oppressive stillness in the atmosphere that hints of much [he has learned to feel these signs] but says nothing. The Balanced Rock and the pinnacles stand in petrified silence – waiting. The wildlife has withdrawn to the night, the flies and gnats have disappeared, a few birds sing, and the last of the flowers of summer – the globemallow – have died. What is it that’s haunting me? At times I hear voices up the road, familiar voices…I look; and no one is there. (206)

Gretel Ehrlich and Bitter Cold

Born in Santa Barbara, CA, and educated at liberal schools in the East, it was the traumatic death of a loved one and resulting twists of fate that landed Gretel Ehrlich in the rough and tumble Republic of Sheep Country, WY, in the 1970s. Her exploits of the region are described in her naturalistic autobiography The Solace of Open Spaces. What she originally

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137 During later edits of this research I discovered that Peter Larkin says that Wordsworth describes the gap between something frightfully inaccessible and a reoffering of reality capable of contemplation as a “haunting” gap, 32-33. Wordsworth is haunted by the dichotomy of his natural inclination to categorize something as available or not available. In spots of time, this gap is hauntingly present. Christopher Hitt finds that Wordsworth’s “haunting” becomes his “ministry,” 1.494-495, as quoted in Hitt, 608. I am also haunted by this call to find truth in these ostensible gaps, these spots of time.
viewed as a backcountry excuse for a fine resort retreat, she later adopted as her true homeland. Although physically and mentally broken at that time, Ehrlich found mending through cattle and sheep rustling, a dirty, coarse, windy, and wickedly cold lifestyle, warmed strangely by the land and the “weathered” people that worked it. On the range she began a new life as a full-time writer, married a Wyoming man and his culture, and still lives as a rancher, and clearly, a transformed individual.

What does Ehrlich attribute to her transformation in Wyoming? What was it that she found healing in? Not only does she cite being mentally and physically restored (p.3), she notes how her behavior and perspective – explicit evidence of transformative learning – have been molded by her experience. Ehrlich states that not only did this lifestyle reveal itself as the mere illusion of a retreat (not the American wilderness mindset that she thought it would offer); the move outdoors in her work forced a reunion between her and life. She writes:

I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to “lose myself” in new and unpopulated territory. Instead of producing the numbness I thought I wanted, life on the sheep ranch woke me up. The vitality of the people I was working with flushed out what had become a hallucinatory rawness in me. I threw away my clothes and bought new ones; I cut my hair. The arid country was a clean slate. Its absolute indifference steadied me. (3, emphasis added)

This is such an important point for Ehrlich to begin with. Americans can trace in the history of our ideas of wilderness, especially those ideas defined by the Romantic Era nature writers Emerson, Thoreau, Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth, as basically an idyllic garden for the mind.138 Life in the Wyoming wild would be like a romantic tour with a dashing cowboy on a buckskin steed. Instead of the pleasantries of a vacationing “numbness,” Ehrlich describes the

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138 Nash, 44-66.
intensely jarring experience of “waking up,” being infused with “vitality,” and having a “hallucinatory rawness” “flushed out” of her.

She begins to see, like Abbey, the importance of communicating her experience of the weather especially. In case we doubt her level of clear understanding of the value of weather in her learning, she states in the preface to her book: “The truest art I would strive for in any work would be to give the page the same qualities as earth: weather would land on it harshly; light would elucidate the most difficult truths; wind would sweep away obtuse padding” (x). Here we are getting somewhere. Wyoming itself is falling aside, and the weather is coming into focus. Just as Ehrlich once called her reform “Wyoming,” we environmental philosophers too make the mistake of attributing this learning to a place, a name, when instead it is a much broader concept of the aesthetic weather-rich world we are experiencing and the sense that we make of those experiences.

What I would consider to be first signs of a Maxine Greene-like “wide awakeness” to the political world, sparked by interaction and attention, Ehrlich interestingly takes to be a straightforward shot of the “absolute indifference” her new environment. Human connections did not “wake her up” – Wyoming did! To be more accurate, Ehrlich’s feel for the neutrality of the weather-saturated environment gave her the sense that an outside force of nature changed her, a force like the weather. This seems at first glance to be an outstanding claim. Certainly the people in Wyoming were her teachers, not a cold view of the arid country. But when we look closer, her logic unfolds steadily with her stories. “The lessons of impermanence taught me this: loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life,” she says, as she reasons that it is in fact the very coldness of the environment that moves her (x).
The very fact that the weather always changes, and yet has the static feel of omnipresence, is steadying for Ehrlich. The depressing loss and despair that Wyoming represented for her, those long days out on the nothingness of the plains, helped her to desire survival all the more. The “bitter cold,” as we will find is a major theme in Ehrlich, is the twinge across the skin that keeps the blood circulating inside. Ehrlich uses the contrast of the bitter cold to know the sweetness of warmth. Her experience and Abbey’s are useful companions for the purposes of this inquiry.

Before we go further into the theme of the bitter cold, we must be sure we are not conflating impermanence, disinterestedness, purposiveness, purpose, and indifference; each term deserves unpacking in this context, because we are soon to see that the nature writers hit upon deep-seated philosophical ethical and metaphysical concerns about the circle of non-human life and non-living nature, as well as aesthetic conceptualizations. Kant from Chapter II and Abbey have already introduced disinterestedness to this research discussion, but there is so much more to these to say before we can continue functionally. Since these are each concepts with an enormous, weighty history of philosophy behind them, the tight definitions here shall suffice, and I will take each in kind as it appears later on.

**Impermanence.** In Buddhism, impermanence is the doctrine that things in the world have no set soul or substance that remains forever unchanged. Likewise, in Western thought, Alfred North Whitehead sees reality as constantly changing, and argues that things do not have an essence or form to them. Dewey talks about how the only thing that is static is intransient nature of experience. However, the concept of impermanence does not imply that truth changes, only that the movements of the world are not predetermined. Impermanence is intended to contradict any philosophical tendency toward concrete conclusions. According to the theory of
impermanence, solidifying statements cannot accurately represent our constantly changing world.

**Indifference.** Indifference (often synonymous with disinterestedness but with different historical conventions) is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as an absence of feeling for or against something. By this definition it may seem that indifference is the very antithesis of aesthetics, which are laden with feeling, but really it is indicating the native neutrality of an object and the absence of self-interest in judgments upon that object. This term has been used both in philosophy of metaphysics and aesthetics.

The metaphysical idea of *absolute indifference* comes to us most notably from Fichte and Schelling, and states that Reason is the elevated point where subject and object are absolutely indifferent, which means more directly that subject and object are one and the same in absolute form. This is not to be confused with the postmodern concept of indifference in aesthetics. Aesthetically, and for our discussion here, indifference is the feature of human judgment that ascertains passive, neutral, or ironic things as being of value. This modern notion of indifference (think Marcel Duchamp’s “Fountain” or Moira Roth’s aesthetics of indifference in art history) is quite the opposite of a judgment of taste that relies on pleasure, human interest, or common purpose.

Although it is similar in style to words used by Abbey and Ehrlich, indifference can also imply an added apathy, or a negative tone, which we cannot quite argue is or is not a part of non-human nature, but we attribute it to nature regardless (to the chagrin of the Stoics who held above all things that Nature is neutral, utterly disinterested without indifference.) For example, Ehrlich says, “It’s May and I’ve just awakened from a nap, curled against sagebrush the way my dog taught me to sleep – sheltered from wind. A front is pulling the huge sky over me, and from
the dark a hailstone has hit me on the head” (1). The hailstone attack may mean something to Ehrlich – make a difference – in her life, but the sky did not throw it down upon her in a fit of fury. As such, the sky can appear indifferent in an ontological sense, but it is not aesthetically indifferent in the same way that we can judge indifference in art due to the artist that is behind the creation of the work, at least not unless we consider God as Nature’s artist, as we will see later with Wordsworth and Muir.

**Disinterestedness.** Abbey says that disinterestedness is a quality of non-human nature. I think it is highly likely, given Abbey’s well-read and thorough training in philosophy, that he would mean anything less than the fullest concept of disinterestedness in his own philosophical musings. Kant and I would likely agree with his notes.

While other concepts of aesthetics hold that value arises in our human creativity and imagination coming in contact with something in the world, leading humans to have a taste for the beauty of human genius, and forms in nature that reflect what we see as creationistic material, or products, disinterestedness implies that the opposite is of value in aesthetics. That is, non-human nature is important precisely because it lacks human meddling, it is of value to us because it is not from us; non-human nature ought to be important because it is wholly foreign and unique. It is inherently valuable, because we cannot recreate it or control it with our will, our wants, purposes, or designs. You will recall that this is slightly different from Kant’s use of disinterestedness in the sublime, because the Kantian aesthetic judgments locate the sublime, ultimately, in the human mind not the outside world.139

**Purposiveness Without a Purpose.** Kant and the German Idealists have many elaborate and detailed differentiations between what a purpose, purposiveness, contrapurposive, and

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139 See Brady for a defense of Kantian disinterestedness in aesthetics and ethics, 132-142.
impurposiveness mean between different versions of the subjective or the formal. For our uses, 

purposiveness without a purpose is a term that originates in art aesthetics with the idea of “art for 

art’s sake” rather than art for another purpose. It is in essence a teleological discussion. For 

outdoor research and especially Ehrlich’s work, to be purposive without a purpose means to have a 
telos, a drive toward a goal for its own sake without having a declared and defined human 

purpose. Non-human nature is an excellent example of purposiveness without a purpose, as 
humans can really never access the big-picture truth of how and why natural objects exist beyond 

us (this is very Kantian, and a second of Kant’s criteria for judgments in beauty). However, that 
is not to say that these non-human things go about their existence without “purposiveness,” the 
innate force of life that makes their lives meaningful in and of themselves. As the case with 
disinterestedness, when these nature writer’s imply purposiveness, they imply an inherent value 
in non-human nature, an ethical reason for reverence and care toward otherness. This is, in many 
ways accepted as fact in environmental philosophy, although it is often the case that our human 
anthropocentric perspectives, purposes, and cultural valuations overrule these principles in 
environmental ethics.

**Ripe to Rot**

The term impermanence was distinguished from indifference, disinterestedness, or 
purposiveness without a purpose and defined in the previous section because it is one of the 
strongest themes in Ehrlich’s book. From the impermanence of her surrounds Ehrlich imports 
meaning. She states on p. 83, “There is nothing in nature that can’t be taken as a sign of both 
mortality and invigoration.” Death and life. Ripe to rot to ripen again. Ehrlich embraces 
paradoxical relationships like these; she makes her time in Wyoming into a study of
contradictions. Perhaps our best example of this is in her emphasis on the seasonality of her new home, the methodic turning of nature’s clock. It is with a mournful yet exciting tone that the earth changes hands between seasons, from the smells on the air (the iron scent, petrichor, in the wetness of spring and winter that we will later notice in Oliver’s experiences) to the silent, breath-holding breeze that ushers in a weather front. For Ehrlich, the loss, the melancholy feelings, in conjunction with the fresh feelings of an incoming season bent on wiping away the memories of the past season, are indirect lessons.

All through autumn we hear a double voice: one says everything is ripe; the other says everything is dying. The paradox is exquisite. We feel what the Japanese call ‘aware’ – an almost untranslatable word meaning something like ‘beauty tinged with sadness.’ Some days we have to shoulder against a marauding melancholy. Dreams have a hallucinatory effect… (127)

“The paradox is exquisite,” Ehrlich says, but it is her self-reflective attention to the paradox that is exquisite. Her comment on the seasons strikes me deeply. How is it that what feels so truly awful about change – the dead and rotting parts of life – is at the same time incredibly attractive to the human spirit? I think of artist Georgia O’Keefe’s mix of giant flowers and animal skulls, and I think of the great number of Minnesotans that I have heard about moving back to the state after time away on the southern coast, in another place where the seasons are not so defined. Can it be the case that something that brings humans such immense melancholy is in itself beautiful, like a tragic story of star-crossed lovers somehow helps us believe in love all the more? If so, how?

The Japanese word Ehrlich refers to is not the word ‘aware’ in English, but another meaning of the same spelling aware (ah-WAH-ray), or in full phrase, mono no aware, “a sensitivity toward the passing of things as a real aspect of life.” The Japanese describe in a
simple phrase the infinitely complicated concept that Ehrlich is wrestling with. But this gives us even further clarification on the struggles and limitations imposed upon these nature writers through our cultural use of English. Not only is this feeling foreign to our language, it seems also foreign to our logic. We recognize the experience of mono no aware as a common thread in growing up human, a sort of grappling with immortality that we all must endure so that we do not crumble with every loss. But this certainly speaks of more than the natural progression of aging. Ehrlich and this deep phrase aim to highlight the perspective-altering impact that holding the reality of life and the transience of the world in our mind and body at once is transformative. The lesson is a necessary one, but it is not one that all people will be able to reach, at least not in holding it at once in a moment in time, in a transitional period of the seasons like Ehrlich does.

Although we can imagine that at the death of her loved one, Ehrlich might have felt mono no aware, yet in her writing, the seasons in Wyoming are somehow different. She does not seem to be reliving a memory, but rather, making a new one with the seasonal passing to winter. Take, for instance, this description of the last aspen leaves. “Against rimrock, tall aspens have the graceful bearing of giraffes, and another small grove, not yet turned, gives off a virginal limelight that transpires everything heavy.”\(^{140}\) If we take her metaphor of the limelight and rephrase it for analysis, she is saying that the greenish light, pure and powerful, is able to cut through the thickest rock and weighty feelings of the observer. One small beam of light from a still-green patch of trees is more powerful than the rest of the rimrock and aspens in its youthful contrast to the heaviness of the scene of autumnal change. The light and its strange effect of being able to transfigure two mutating seasons reappears as another metaphor just a few pages later:

\(^{140}\) Ehrlich, 127. Note the reappearance of the word “limelight” from my descriptions of the plains and Patagonian pampa.
...The morning sky looks like cheese. Its cobalt wheel has been cut down and all
the richness of the season is at our feet. The quick-blanch of frost stings autumn’s
rouge into a skin that is tawny. At dawn, mowed hay meadows are the color of
pumpkins, and the willows, leafless now, are pink and silver batons conducting
inaudible river music. When I dress for the day, my body, white and suddenly
numb, looks like dead coral. (129)

This time, however, the change is reflected both in the lack of color in the sky, and the projection
of all of that missing color back onto her pale skin into ruddiness – “frost stings autumn’s rouge
into tawny skin.” Ehrlich’s skin has become like the leaves on the ground, baked in the summer
sun, overdone, and waiting to lose its color completely in the onslaught of winter. It is not a
pretty sight, but it is a very realistic one, and it is sobering to see one’s skin the color of fading
autumn. Even in Ehrlich’s talk of the landscape of Wyoming, there is the common factor not of
earth, dirt, soil, or a U.S. state, but of elemental forces such as pure light. This is especially
evident in her talk not of Wyoming in the winter, but the light in winter, the light on her body,
and the light in the trees.

Ehrlich’s metaphors come straight from the seasons, not the land. She declares it to be
her “text:”

The poet Seamus Heaney said that landscape is sacramental, to be read as text.
Earth is instinct: perfect, irrational, semiotic. If I read winter right, it is a scroll –
the white growing wider and wider like the sweep of an arm – and from it we gain
a peripheral vision, a capacity for what Nabokov calls ‘those asides of spirit, those
footnotes in the volume of life by which we know life and find it to be good.’
...Not unlike emotional transitions – the loss of a friend or the beginning of new
work – the passage of the seasons is often so belabored and quixotic as to deserve
separate names so the year might be divided eight ways instead of four. (71,
emphasis added)
Ehrlich compares the “belabored and quixotic” seasonal transitions to the emotional tumult of the loss of a friend or acquisition of a new task. The ups and downs of life, we might say. But she is not saying that the winter is the “down” season of life, just that the transition of the seasons itself is a challenging and mystifying emotional change that we also bear. Fittingly, Ehrlich concludes her book with another seasonal transition. Here are her final comments:

In the fall, my life, too, is timbered, an unaccountably libidinous place: damp, overripe, and fading. The sky’s congestion allows the eye’s iris to open wider.

“Autumn teaches us that fruition is also death; that ripeness is a form of decay…Leaves are verbs that conjugate the seasons.

Today the sky is a wafer. Placed on my tongue, it is a wholeness that has already disintegrated; placed under the tongue, it makes my heart beat strongly enough to stretch myself over the winter brilliances to come. Now I feel the tenderness to which this season rots. Its defenselessness can no longer be corrupted. Death is its purity its sweet mud. The string of storms that came across Wyoming like elephants tied tail to trunk falters now and bleeds into a stillness. There is neither sun, nor wind, nor snow falling.

…The light of these autumn days, bathed in what Tennyson called ‘a mockery of sunshine,’ will go completely out. (130, emphasis added)

And, with that, her book ends with the metaphorical and literal seasonal light going completely out, the weather still, and the earth essentially enjoying “death in its purity.” What was damp, overripe, fading, congested, “opens” her eyes. Where there is sunshine in summer, there is only a mockery of it in autumn, and darkness is winter to replace it. What she finds beautiful and meaningful is the same thing that appears useless and ugly other times, so she realizes that her valuation has been misguided, faulty, a “mockery” of the world as it truly is.
Melancholy, Agony and Ache

We cannot accuse Ehrlich of just waxing poetic; she takes the rot and the ripe and still goes one step further in her morose ruminations by highlighting the disturbing element of the cold as painful. If one has seen a winter in northern Wyoming, it is impossible to attest to the feelings of it without recognizing the melancholy, agony, and ache as fully defined in such a winter as it ever can be. She discusses the psychedelic (Abbey-like) state of the Northern Lights above her in a joyous, high-feeling moment but places it immediately alongside the cold ache accompanying a night like that, wherein frigid-regioned atmospheric phenomena can be made visible. Remember, though, that it was in Ehrlich’s lowest life stage, after a beloved’s death, that she found solace in the open plains. There was something healing about this lonely place, not despite, but because of its painful weather. Her theory is that the agony in our bones on a cold day, the ache in our lives made physical, actually softens us to the sense of warmth we might feel in others, emotionally and physically. Cold ache allows us to bring together our own mind and body, connect to the minds and bodies of others, and, neighbor-to-neighbor, we develop in the shared experience of a cold day a unique new avenue of communication.

Take, for instance, the first comment you hear from a stranger or even a friend on a cold day: lamentations on the weather. Shared misery! Endless things to say about something so simple around us, something that we are all experiencing, something that seems otherwise completely normal about any given winter day. It is as if we never do grow accustomed to the feelings that the weather gives us, especially if it is a feeling of discomfort. Of course, this sounds terrible to say, that we embrace the chance to agonize together, but I think that Ehrlich (and I for that matter) see it as a positive learning experience. Some pain is needed for growth. Change, melancholy, and ache – these all accompany a period of personal transition. May we
never be at a loss for seasons that remind us of our need for discomfort in the pursuit of making
ourselves more comfortable! Ehrlich gives us this in a cold front rolling in, on p. 126:

As the storm blows east toward the Dakotas, the blue of the sky intensifies. It inks
dry washes and broad grasslands with quiet. In their most complete gesture of
restraint, cottonwoods, willows, and wild rose engorge themselves with every hue
of ruddiness – russet, puce, umber, gold, musteline – whose spectral repletion we
know also to be an agony, riding oncoming waves of cold.

I read these words each time with a nostalgic smile on my lips. As a northern-born Minnesotan, I
grew up hearing so many complaints about the weather. Yet we were always out in it. When
nothing else was a conversation point, there were poetic words spoken, like Ehrlich’s here, about
the “storm blowing in” or the “oncoming waves of cold” expected that evening, that weekend,
that month. It is, again, a paradox in beautiful misery. But that said, I must agree that it did
indeed draw us closer to our neighbors, and even in New York City I see this in action. Riders on
the subway trains make jokes about needing to wedge our larger winter coats onto the bench
seats, and patrons visibly shake off the cold from their bodies as they enter coffee shops – what
for, if not to communicate our shared experience of the weather? In the next section, I explore
the theme of communication further, but it overlaps strongly with the weather-induced pain
response Ehrlich recognizes so clearly in the bitter cold.

On the winter solstice it is thirty-four degrees below zero and there is very little in
the way of daylight. The deep ache of this audacious Arctic air is also the ache in
our lives made physical. Patches of frostbite show up on our noses, toes, and ears.
Skin blisters as if cold were a kind of radiation to which we’ve been exposed. It
strips what is ornamental in us. Part of the ache we feel is also a softness growing.
Our connections with neighbors – whether strong or tenuous, as lovers or friends
– become too urgent to disregard. We rub the frozen toes of a stranger whose
pickup has veered off the road; we open water gaps with a tamping bar and ax; we
splice a friend’s frozen water pipe; we take mittens and blankets to the men who
herd sheep. Twenty or thirty below makes the breath we exchange visible: all of
mine for all of yours. It is the tacit way we express the intimacy no one talks about. (72)

Blistered skin strips off the niceties of ease, and we have to, like I do, laugh at the absurdity of still having pain at all in a modern life, with all the conveniences at hand. For all our evolutionary and technological advances, cold is still cold. The realization of this is not a coldness of humanity, but rather an opportunity for us to continue to learn how to relate to each other and the environment without hiding from it. Sure, it is true that we do hide in winter, to some extent, but imagine what exposure has shown Ehrlich, taught Minnesotans and Inuits alike for generations, passed on with their own special language of snow and weather-speak.

“Winter sets up curious oppositions in us,” Ehrlich says. “Where a wall of snow can seem threatening, it also protects our staggering psyches. All this cold has an anesthetizing effect: the pulse lowers and blankets of snow induce sleep” (73). We wish to shut down in the cold, and we would think that our bodies would force us into hibernation, but like Abbey, our bodies react favorably to the challenge of the elements in many ways. We lean into the cold, and we lean into other warm bodies. Ehrlich continues,

Though the rancher’s workload is lightened in winter because of the short days, the work that does need to be done requires an exhausting patience. And while earth’s sudden frigidity can seem to dispossess us, the teamwork on cold nights during calving, for instance, creates a profound camaraderie – one that’s laced with dark humor, an effervescent lunacy, and unexpected fits of anger and tears. To offset Wyoming’s Arctic seascape, a nightly flush of Northern Lights dances above the Big Horns, irradiating winter’s pallor and reminding us that even though at this time of year we veer toward our various nests and seclusions, nature expresses itself as a bright fuse, irrepresible and orgasmic. (73)

Our bodies slow down in lower temperatures, even our blood pumps more slowly, but our minds stay sharp in the practice of patience and waiting, waiting out the cold, waiting out the pain, or
working through it to get things done when we come to the point that waiting is not enough. There has hardly been a culture that so thoroughly devalues patience as we modern Americans do. Could there be hope, oddly, in being patient with the cold?

Moreover, she says here that the bitter cold brings on the feeling that the earth has “dispossessed us.” The earth is disinterested, maybe even indifferent to our frustration, so we cold creatures must ban together to survive. Nature is in full force we see in the sky, so what are we to do about it, we must ask. It can be easy, Ehrlich says, to “suffer from snow blindness, selecting what we see and feel while our pain whites itself out. But where there is suffocation and self-imposed ignorance, there is also refreshment – snow on flushed cheeks and a pristine kind of thinking,” and on the iced ponds we could just as easily see a “[reflection of the mind as] sharp, vigilant, precise,” like skating blades across the ice of our brains; “In winter, consciousness looks like an etching” (74). Our thoughts are laid out as plainly as deep cuts into glass.

**Dust or Cold as Visible Air: Seeing Communication**

Despite each talking about a different polar extreme from the other, vision is as much a theme in Ehrlich as it is in Abbey. But for Ehrlich, light is not the focus of her discussion of vision; rather, moisture trapped on air is. Abbey cannot have the same experience of visible breath that Ehrlich refers to when she says, “Twenty or thirty below makes the breath we exchange visible: all of mine for all of yours. It is the tacit way we express the intimacy no one talks about,” because as dry as a winter day can be, water still lingers so plainly that it shows up at the end of our noses, right between our eyes (72). Although we typically associate communication with sound, in the cold, any squeak or shout is swallowed up like a minnow in a
whale. Yet in the bitter cold, the visual aspect of communication is magnified. Even if we do not make noise, the very air we share sucks the water from our throats as we exhale, and our watery breath remains suspended in front of us, as a reminder that we communicate still with our physical appearance and gestures, our very breath, even if we do not make the effort to form speech.

It seems perhaps to be a frightening thing to be betrayed by the natural communication of our body language even without our control over our words, but like the cold, it is a bittersweet fact of life. Intimacy oozes from our pores with the heat and moisture that we radiate into the atmosphere merely by living, and our breath eventually seeps from our lips even if we attempt to hold onto it a bit longer. Ehrlich notices that the cold reveals us for all to see, just as the desert appears even (or maybe only) while the sun blinds us. These are two types of exposures, the former of the observer, the latter the environment, and yet neither are exposed by the traditional method. When communicating, we expect to use auditory senses, but in the cold communication is visual; when seeing, we expect vision to be activated, yet in the too-bright sun, sight comes instead through touch or non-visual perception.

We often think of cold weather as closed off, imagining tightly shut windows and people huddled closely over fires, but for Ehrlich cold weather is social too. We will notice later that Thoreau also saw winter as social through the chattering of animals, preserved tracks in the snow used as cross-species trails to water sources, and the crackling ice. And, as furthered evidenced in Thoreau’s discussion of the thundering pond, which we will come to in the next chapter, this idea of the air as visible communication is not limited to blistering winters, either. Thoreau explains that even, “A field of water betrays the spirit that is in the air…” He elaborates:
It is continually receiving new life and motion from above. It is intermediate in its nature between land and sky. On land only the grass and trees wave, but the water itself if rippled by the wind. I see where the breeze dashes across it by the streaks or flakes of light. It is remarkable that we can look down on its surface. We shall, perhaps, look down thus on the surface of air at length, and mark where a still subtler spirit sweeps over it.\footnote{Thoreau, \textit{Walden}, 201.}

Dust particles suspended in the air that swirl as we move about a sunny room in the mid-afternoon, wind that flutters the pages of a book in hand, condensation collecting on car windows, and the weight of humid air dragging down leaves all are examples, both human and non-human, of the shared language of our environment. It may not be in English or Latin, but it is nonetheless a sort of \textit{lingua franca}. Cues are moving about just as words, stringing together a description of the environment at present.\footnote{See Peters’s book \textit{Speaking Into the Air} for a contemporary discussion of the air as a medium – media – for communication.}

Philosopher of education Derek Ford relates visible communication on air to schools in his work on the pneumatic common of the classroom. An environment may differ, but a shared sphere of air remains, and within that sphere a teacher might is a gauge the health of the space, and an expression of the “climate” of that environment. Classrooms are environments of shared breath, Ford argues, and I add that we can say the same in reverse: that outdoor environments are pneumatic commons as well, classrooms in their own right. Ford speaks of “air conditions,” as we associate those terms with forced air or A/C units purely metaphorically, but his work supports the conclusion that air conditions exist in all places, and some conditions may be more conducive to learning than others. We concur that the \textit{condition of the air} is indeed a factor in quality learning.
Thinking of air in relation to human interactions in the classroom reminds me again of the deep sociality embedded in Ehrlich’s characterization of wind. Her philosophy of wind is similar to the Holy Winds of the Diné (Navajo) people. For the Diné, Wind is strongly associated with health, life, words, language, and communication between humans and non-humans. Take, for instance, her story of being sick with pneumonia as a child and needing her mother to support her stifled respiration with puffs of her own air (8). Ehrlich describes this moment as impacting her later romance with the wind. Her mother’s wind once saved her life, just as moving to a place where the wind is more visible to her again saves Ehrlich’s adult life.

As with the cold, ice, and wind, Ehrlich reports that the dust lingering in the air “is the scalpel and the suit of armor that make westerners what they are. Dry air presses a stockman’s insides outward. The secret, inner self is worn not on the sleeve but in the skin. It’s an unlubricated condition: there’s not enough moisture in the air to keep the whole emotional machinery oiled and working” (78-79). This reminds me of an exact location in New York City, under the Flatiron Building, where drafts of wind off of the oddly shaped, wedge building force women’s skirts to billow up. Victorian-era men used to congregate on the park benches nearby to wait for glimpses of ankles and petticoats exposed by the wind.

Abbey must have had an experience in the desert like Ehrlich’s, one wherein the people are reserved and emotionally revealed only in gestures. He spends very little time in Desert Solitaire relaying long conversations he has had with guests of the Arches or coworkers. There is an inner narrative to Abbey’s writing that is rarely punctuated by encounters with other people, but when people are there with him, talk is short and to the point. Ehrlich describes words on the range as sparing, like the water in the desert, “as if verbosity would create a thirst too extreme to
bear,” and “sentence structure is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought… Language, so compressed becomes metaphorical” (79; 6). Metaphorical. Precisely as I argue the importance of metaphorical language in Chapter III, Ehrlich discovers the pervasiveness of metaphor in the rare uttered words on a dusty day.

In dust silence becomes as crucial for communication as noise. “Instead of talking we seem to share one eye. Keenly observed, the world is transformed. The landscape is engorged with detail, every movement on it chillingly sharp” like Abbey’s desert at dusk takes on a barren glow (7). And it is as if mixed with the particles of dirt and the dust in the air, something else is swirling around like pockets of electricity or the eeriness of a fog machine at a rock concert. “The air between people is charged. Days unfold, bathed in their own music. Nights become hallucinatory; dreams, prescient” (7). Ehrlich’s description sounds like the Plains Indians’ vision quests, when non-human objects commune with prairie walkers as if they are all together in some drugged state, all under the same visual influence of the air like it is choked with fairy dust.

When out on her own in the winter, Ehrlich returns to the role of silence of the cold in coming to new philosophical conclusions. Unlike on a warm day, cold air has the strange ability to snuff out echoes or reverberating sounds, a dampening effect. Scientifically, this could indeed be caused by heavy moisture content in the air carrying the sound. And, like the sound on the air, Ehrlich yields, “Winter looks oceanic to me. Snow swells, drops back, and hits the hulls of our lives with a course-bending sound” (72). But on other days, the cold brings Ehrlich to the aloneness felt by Abbey. “During the winter, while I was riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle, and in the silence that such cold creates I felt like the first person on earth, or the last” (1). Again, the absence of sound but the presence of vision is momentous, a complicated
contraction and retraction of sensation and perception that contributes to “bending the course” of a human life.

Annie Dillard and Pressure Fronts

As I explained in Chapter II with a review of the literature on the philosophy of outdoor education, many accounts of outdoor learning are centered around place-based learning environments, or *placefulness*. Ed Casey explains, “To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place.”¹⁴⁴ In line with this nature writing tradition, Annie Dillard, a modern-day resident of the rolling hills and mountains of rural Virginia, documents in her journal the natural environment, the *place* around her. Like we see in Abbey’s Arches, Ehrlich’s Wyoming, and later in Thoreau’s *Walden* and Muir’s Sierras, nature writers are keen to cite their place for study, returning to one area repeatedly to learn its secrets as if lifting the Veil of Isis¹⁴⁵ in a familiar place with aid in generalizing that knowledge to the rest of the world. This is a noble pursuit indeed, and one that yields significant journaling data from our writers.

In fact, Dillard proclaims herself in the pursuit of a “meteorological journal of the mind” (13), a literal journeyer in her own wild backyard. This is the very reason she titles her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, because she is on a spiritual journey for religious truth. She seeks to answer if there is God in a place, in her place. The trouble with interpreting Dillard’s writing as a pilgrimage of a place, her local creek, is that it narrows our thought specifically to the

¹⁴⁴ Casey, ix.

¹⁴⁵ See Hadot’s book entitled *The Veil of Isis*.  

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environmental landscape, conjuring images of the “picturesque” and aesthetic tastefulness that requires a rigid boundary. But the non-human world does not have many actual natural boundaries, other than perhaps the cut of a stream through a wood, or the sudden drop off at a cliff’s edge. It is limiting to consider our experience outdoors as bound to a specific environment, although it is true that we culturally and perhaps biologically are drawn to the simple structure of categorizing space as place.

I am not entirely convinced that nature writers see their “places” as more than the location they are in, as we see that Ehrlich continually uses Wyoming to describe her home but we know the state of Wyoming to be only a label added to a vast ecosystem and bound by government lines. Wyoming itself did not always exist, nor did Dillard’s Tinker Creek. The environment and the weather and the aesthetic world preceded their formal names. So while it is useful to think in terms of “place,” I argue that placefulness in learning has its conceptual limits and erroneous assumptions about the lines humans draw in non-human nature, the artificial structures we create to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical infinity of space.

There are hints that Dillard is attached to more than the outdoor place, and these are what I wish to draw upon. I want to show how, with a subtle shift in language, what appears to be a home-court attachment is in reality her relational method of making sense of the most familiar parts of her environment. She is searching a place but learning from it as more than an isolated location. What she is learning may be built from the Virginia woods, but it is learning applicable to any outdoor environmental experience. As Dillard walks her common paths, her aesthetic sensibilities grow sharper and stronger over time, and she becomes more capable of answering her grander inquiries. She explains this methodological commitment, declaring, “We must somehow take a wider view, look at the whole landscape, really see it, and describe what’s going
on here” (11). As I have explained, though, Dillard is talking of “landscape” as something much vaster than place. We should make note of her starting words here: “…and the shape of the air in the pines. And, if I try to keep my eye on quantum physics, if I try to keep up with astronomy and cosmology, and really believe it all, I might ultimately be able to make out the landscape of the universe. Why not?” (139, emphasis added). The “shape of the air” she says, and the landscape not of her Virginia wilds but of the universe. Air has no place, and it only has shape as we view it in its movements with things like blades of grass or flickering pine needles.

It is too simple, too easy, and frankly inaccurate, to see outdoor learning as learning a study of architectural place. In visiting Tinker Creek, Dillard goes from the mindset of one casually sauntering and observing the naturally constructed environment, a “placeful” thinker, to a meteorological journalist, a Thoreauvian naturalist. She says, “…surely it ought to have been enough, more than enough. But look what happens. You open the door and all heaven and hell break loose” (133). What she finds is a greater complexity and depth of learning than she had imagined. Dillard morphs from observer to researcher, weather exposure to weather learning: “I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood” (15).

**Pressure is Memorable**

When dark black clouds roll into the sky, beasts of tremendous foreboding, we notice and we react. Dillard describes the process of reacting to our environment early in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*: “…I see something, …or something sees me, some enormous power brushes me with its clean wing, and I resound like a beaten bell” (14). We answer to environmental pressure, especially air pressure.
These are morning matters, pictures you dream as the final wave heaves you up on the sand to the bright light and drying air. You remember pressure, and a curved sleep you rested against, soft, like a scallop in its shell. But the air hardens on your skin; you stand; you leave the lighted shore to explore some dim headland, and soon you’re lost in the leafy interior, intent, remembering nothing. (4)

Dillard says that you remember pressure cradling you like a mollusk, but when that pressure shifts, or air hardens, as it most certainly will do with the chill of the morning, you are propelled out of your cozy nest to explore and move again. Although the pressure was your impetus for awakening, you later cannot remember anything at all. How, then, is pressure memorable? I think she is speaking here of two different forms of remembering. The former is a memory in the body, the latter a mental memory. After a night of witnessing wild happenings and wonders outdoors, Dillard reverberates with bodily memory: “I walked home in a shivering daze, up hill and down. Later I lay open-mouthed in bed, my arms flung wide at my sides to steady the whirling darkness” (23). Her experience is defined by her body’s tonal change, the muscle twinges that remind her learning has happened.

Air pressure changes are most palpable in the case of a looming weather fronts. The impact of atmospheric pressure on Dillard is so vital to her learning experiences outdoors that it is worth quoting a series of excerpts from her journal on this matter:

In a dry wind like this, snow and ice can pass directly into the air as a gas without having first melted to water. This process is called sublimation; tonight the snow in the yard and the ice in the creek sublime. A breeze buffets my palm held a foot from the wall. A wind like this does my breathing for me; it engenders something quick and kicking in my lungs... A single cell quivers at a windy embrace; it swells and splits, it bubbles into a raspberry; a dark clot starts to throb. Soon something perfect is born. Something wholly new rides the wind, something fleet and fleeting I’m likely to miss. (54)
In physics, sublimation of matter directly from a solid to a gas phase requires a particular combination of temperature and pressure. Sublimation, the racing forward into another state, could also be called transformation of states. In some cases, chemists use sublimation to purify compounds, and historically, sublimation was thought to possibly bring about alchemy – the transformation of base metals into “noble metals” like pure gold. It is no coincidence, then that Dillard uses sublimation as a name for the feeling of change that she gets from a dry wind. And, like the mastery of alchemy, one must be vigilant and on point to catch that “fleeting” speck of gold that “rides the wind.”

Being outdoors is a state of preparation for sublimation, rapid change, dramatic change, for Dillard. “You may wake and look from the window and breathe the real air, and say, with satisfaction or with longing, ‘This is it.’ But if you look up the creek, if you look up the creek in any weather, your spirit fills, and you are saying, with an exulting rise of the lungs, ‘Here it comes!’” (101). Watch for it in any weather, Dillard says. Here it comes! The weather fills us with exuberance and readiness, it does not just tell us like peering out the window to see if it is raining or not, it shakes and rattles us so that we are physically prepared for it.

Sometimes, in humid weather, when it is not nice outside, Dillard feels the gold on the air with a quality of dread. We are not always ready for change, and it can feel like an approaching shadow. This too, is the reality of transformative learning. We may not always greet it with rosy glasses and open arms, and it may sneak into our lives without clamor. She writes:

Still the day had an air of menace. A broken whiskey bottle by the log, the brown tip of a snake’s tail disappearing between two rocks on the hill at my back, the rabbit the dog nearly caught, the rabies I knew was in the country, the bees who kept unaccountably fumbling at my forehead with their furred feet…
I headed over to the new woods by the creek, the motorbike woods. They were strangely empty. The air was so steamy I could barely see...There wasn’t a breath of wind. (150).

The absence of something expected in our environment, like wind, can take on an “air of menace.” I am struck immediately by the similarity of Dillard’s experience with steamy and smothering air and Abbey’s haunting moment expecting someone on the road with him. Sometimes we are truly surprised by what we find outdoors, and it unsettles us as much as it rights us. This too, is learning, and it is as important as the feel-good type of learning experience that we are most accustomed to. Maybe this disposition is even more crucial to our transformation.

**Affront of Light**

Transformative learning is as risky as it is ultimately rewarding. To change, although it is often inevitable, is to let in something new for a while. It is vulnerability, and it is letting go to something old. Dillard does not mince words about the experience, like Socrates’s Allegory of the Cave, of looking directly into the affront of light in the real world. “Darkness appalls and light dazzles; the scrap of visible light that doesn’t hurt my eyes hurts my brain. What I see sets me swaying. Size and distance and the sudden swelling of meanings confuse me, bowl me over...I’m dizzy, I fall in. This looking business is risky.” This reminds me of my recent viewing of the partial solar eclipse from my New York apartment window. In order to view the phenomenon, I had to force my eyes directly in the line of the sun, feeling them water and burn without protective lenses for the hope of experiencing it fully from my own natural lenses. This, of course, was too much at once. The intensity of the sun was a blinding affront from which I struggled even still to look away from its dizziness. I had fallen into the sun.
Dillard cites a letter written by Van Gogh, about how “’a great deal of light falls on everything.’ If we are blinded by darkness,” she says, “we are also blinded by light. When too much light falls on everything, a special terror results” (24). Dillard then proceeds to tell the story of the Greenland Eskimos, who fall prey to a psychological sickness in their kayaks out on the fjords’ waters in still weather. When a kayak hunter experiences this flat, windless day, the water lies so quiet that it appears to be glass. The hunter cannot flinch, or he would scare away the seals, his prey. After many hours like this, with the sun low and beaming off the mirror water into his eyes, he falls into a trace that feels very much like sinking into the water. Paralyzed by fear, he cannot hunt to save himself.

Being outdoors in the weather is a risk, but a worthy one. Dillard retells another story of light learning, “Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone” (34). She is not without a modicum of fear: “But I can’t go out and try to see this way. I’ll fail, I’ll go mad,” she worries. Dillard reminds herself then of Jacques Ellul saying, “Launch into the deep, and you shall see” (34). So she goes, and she takes as careful an approach outdoors as possible, fully aware of the risks and rewards of this exposure:

Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights; you look along it, mildly, acknowledging its presence without real interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance…although it comes to those who wait for it, it is always, event to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise. (34)

This theme of a “gift” from the weather, the “subjects and objects” that “act and rest purely, without utterance” we will recognize again in the next Chapter as an idea of Thoreau’s, who
strongly influenced Dillard’s nature writing. Dillard is waiting for a lesson to come, but it is still a surprise gift from the non-human things that do not speak a language per se, yet can pass on some offering to her that she will readily accept. “The secret of seeing,” or learning, Dillard says, “is to sail on solar wind. Hone and spread your spirit till you yourself are a sail, whetted, translucent, broadside to the merest puff” (34). Work with the weather, not against it, and it will bring you gifts.

I find it marvelously fascinating and affirming that Dillard is not the only one to philosophize about the weather like this. She reports that Stephen Graham,

Startled me by describing this same gift in his antique and elegant book, The Gentle Art of Tramping. He wrote, “And as you sit on the hillside, or lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet-legged on the shingly beach of a mountain stream, the great door, that does not look like a door, opens.” That great door opens on the present, illuminates it as with a multitude of flashing torches (81).

Notice the connection Dillard makes, again in the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greeks, like Plato, to the allusion of light in learning. There is agency involved in getting outside, but the learning itself is as much of a gift as a ray of light on a winter day. We will return to this theme in greater detail when we discuss the experiences of Thoreau with apricity. For now, we transition from allusion to illusion, and reap the rewards of a metaphorical take on the tricks that light plays and how we can interpret light as learning.

**Optical Illusions as Metaphors of Life**

There are seven or eight categories of phenomena in the world that are worth talking about, and one of them is the weather. Any time you care to get in your car and drive across the country and over the mountains, come into our valley, cross Tinker Creek, drive up the road to the house, walk across the yard, knock on the door and ask to come in and talk about the weather, you’d be welcome. (51)
You are welcome, Dillard invites, to come and discuss the weather. Where does her faith and belief and attachment to the weather come from? In this subsection we revisit a great optical illusion that becomes a memorable friend throughout her life, giving her advice, embracing her in down times, and giving her reason to contemplate the sky. We shall call her friend by the phrase she uses, “The Tree With the Lights In It.” It may not be an elegant name, but it is a revealing one. When describing how she finds philosophy of life in her journaling and searching outdoors, and why she is called so loudly to that effort, she tells a story of a blind girl, newly restored to sight.

When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it.’ It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charges and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam. (36)

The no-longer-blind girl, without a vocabulary yet to reference, described a backlit tree as having dazzling twinkle lights like a decorated Christmas tree. It was a humble and childlike understanding, but one, once introduced, that even Dillard could see too. And with the same mystification of coincidence and mutual understanding that we are flushed with when we suddenly hear someone else’s story in our lives as if it were happening to us and not them for the first time, Dillard was charmed into looking for that same optical illusion of The Tree With the
Lights In It. It is fascinating to find a similar line in John Muir, when he describes a tree canopy that “looks something like a cumulus cloud when the sunshine is pouring over it” (21).\(^{146}\) The occurrence of these common experiences is not mere coincidence at this point, as we have noticed, the overlaps are strong and frequent. They are evidence of a Deweyan-like shared experience of aesthetic learning outdoors in a weather-rich environment that we have in common yet find so challenging to put to equal words. Dillard does this with the case of The Tree With the Lights In It. She gives a label to experience, just as we will later see in Chapter VI that Wordsworth calls similar experiences “spots of time.”

Dillard’s most notable experience finding The Tree With the Lights In It is told within another outdoor story of “Patting the Puppy.” Dillard tells a simple tale set at a desolate gas station with remarkable elegance befitting the weight of the moment:

I am absolutely alone. There are no other customers. The road is vacant, the interstate is out of sight and earshot. I have hazarded into a new corner of the world, an unknown spot, a Brigadoon. Before me extends a low hill trembling in yellow brome, and behind the hill, filling the sky, rises and enormous mountain ridge, forested, alive and awesome with brilliant blown lights. I have never seen anything so tremulous and live. Overhead, great strips and chunks of cloud dash to the northwest in a gold rush. At my back the sun is setting – how can I not have noticed before tat the sun is setting? My mind has been a blank slab of black asphalt for hours, but that doesn’t stop the sun’s wild wheel. I set my coffee beside me on the curb; I smell loam on the wind; I pat the puppy; I watch the mountain.

My hand works automatically over the puppy’s fur, following the line of hair under his ears, down his neck, inside his forelegs, along his hot-skinned belly. Shadows lope along the mountain’s rumpled flanks...A warm purple pigment pools in each ruck and tuck of the rock...As the purple vaults and slides, it tricks out the unleafed forest and rumpled rock in gilt, in shape-shifting patches of glow. These gold lights veer and retract, shatter and glide in a series of dazzling

\(^{146}\) Coincidentally, another “tree alight” experience is cited by Muir, 29: “…when the wind sways the needles all one way at a certain angle every tree becomes a tower of white quivering sun-fire.”
splashes, shrinking, leaking, exploding…the light warms and reddens…The air cools; the puppy’s skin is hot. I am more alive than all the world.

This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I’ve lost it, I also realize that the puppy is still squirming on his back under my hand. Nothing has changed for him…

I sip my coffee. I look at the mountain, which is still doing its tricks, as you look at a still-beautiful face belonging to a person who was once your lover in another country years ago: with fond nostalgia, and recognition, but no real feeling save a secret astonishment that you are now strangers. Thanks. For the memories.

…Catch it [the gilt light] if you can. (79-80)

This compound moment of optical illusion and sensation is wiped away from her awareness as quickly as it came. She goes from the motion of patting the warm belly of the puppy and examining the light cast across the mountain, moving golden flakes over the barren trees and rock, to a jarring other-state as her self-consciousness cuts the umbilical cord bound to the sun, severing her from her aesthetic experience, she snorts, like “a bitter birthday present from evolution” (80). She identifies the experience she was having Patting the Puppy as an outdoor aesthetic one, which she prematurely broke with cognitive narrative. She allowed her mind to take control of the situation, although it should have been her entire self in that moment, not a stream of self-consciousness exercising its fabled superiority. Consciousness and presence are valuable, but self-consciousness it premature reflection that drives out experience (82). Reflection is necessary for learning, but it cannot surpass the moment of primary experience. As Dewey explains, reflection is secondary, not primary.147 About this cut in experiencing, she laments,

...that I drew scales over my eyes between me and the mountain and gloved my hand between me and the puppy – is not the only point. After all, it would have ended anyway. I’ve never seen a sunset or felt a wind that didn’t. No, the point is that not only does time fly and do we die, but that in these reckless conditions we live at all, and are vouchsafed, for the duration of certain inexplicable moments, to know it (80).

How surprising it is that “in these reckless conditions” where our mind so easily dominates with self-consciousness that we “live at all.” How amazing, she says, that we can experience even momentarily such aesthetic awareness, and approach that moment with the sense that we can actually grasp the reality of it.

“What made me look at that roadside tree?” Dillard asks herself (84.) Yes, what caused that door to open at that time? Time is fleeting, and although transformative lessons are learned that stay with us forever, time does not allow us to say in the primary experience of learning for very long. “We tune in and out,” Dillard explains, “but moments are not lost” (86). It is not as if she has forgotten Patting the Puppy or The Tree With the Lights In It. At another passing moment she says an experience will open like a door, “And the cumulative force of the present you’ve forgotten sets you reeling, staggering, as if you’d been struck broadside by a plank. It all floods back to you” (86). When the day comes again that memory of your transformative experience outdoors returns to you, it is not the puppy or the tree itself that you notice, she says, “…This is it, this is the real weather, the lavender light fading, the full moisture in your lungs, the heat from the pavement on your lips and palms – not the dry orange dust form horses’ hooves, the salt sea, the sour Coke – but this solid air” (86). It is the real weather that you see and feel again. Why? The reason must be that weather is as much an original feature of the experience as the objects and things that its atmospheric light had illuminated.
Dillard coyly returns to the moment, looking directly at us her readers, and at the no-longer-blind girl: “You have seen the tree with the lights in it, haven’t you? You must have…I don’t know what Pascal saw. I saw a cedar. Xerxes saw a sycamore” (89). Was mine a tree, I wonder, when I saw The Lights for the first time? I am thinking of Dr. Biggs, my introduction to this dissertation, and the classroom poll about our first meaningful moments of learning that so often happen to be outdoors. My answer comes to me as I review my phrasing. I no longer focus on the tree itself, as I have learned through reading these nature writings that there is so much more that permeates an experience than a single focal object. It is an atmospheric, illusionary, environmental flow that lights up a tree in this most memorable way.

When we come to Dillard’s conclusion, there is a sense that her pilgrimage has indeed come to fruition, she has established some working understanding of a causal, God-like movement about her environment, and there is less of the angst of her earliest pages in her conclusion. She looks at what was at first a homey place as now a world anew, and I get the distinct sense that she has found a modicum of peace and understanding even about the parts of her environment that had once been brashly alien. “So I breathe,” Dillard reflects,

I breathe at the open window above my desk, and a moist fragrance assails me from the gnawed leaves of the growing mock orange. The air is as intricate as the light that filters through forested mountain ridges and into my kitchen window…

I cannot in all honesty call the world old when I’ve seen it new. On the other hand, neither will honesty permit me suddenly to invoke certain experiences of newness and beauty as binding, sweeping away all knowledge. But I am thinking now of the tree with the lights in it, the cedar in the yard by the creek I saw transfigured. (244)

As Ehrlich spoke of breath like a fragrance upon the air, or a party phone line for humans and non-humans alike, Dillard takes in the air from her window as if it is light streaming in. This
breath of air stimulates reflection on the aesthetic experience of The Tree With the Lights In It, which here she refers to as the world as new. She is also reticent to declare what experiences she has seen as concrete answers, which I agree is a mature level of understanding. She cannot see beauty and newness exclusively in place of the previous knowledge she had of the earth; it is not as if she is brushing away world history with her latest outdoor education. Dillard deduces further that “knowledge does not vanquish mystery, or obscure its distant lights. I still now and will tomorrow steer by what happened that day, when some undeniably new spirit roared down the air, bowled me over, and turned on the lights” (244). As philosophers like Mooney and Sallis and Bugbee can attest, a new experience in nature does not erase the mystery that we crave from it. We can come to know something better without ever exhausting the knowledge possible to be gained from it.

Dillard recalls the experience of The Tree With the Lights In It one more time, and this time she is sure to compare it directly to air, “I stood on grass like air, air like lightning, coursed in my blood, floated my bones, swam in my teeth” (244). The moment that she spent in that primary experience waned, but her reflection upon it ebbs and flows continuously, and is reignited with the lightning, the air, when again the experience is relived in her body. It is our consolation, Dillard claims, that “the tree with the lights in it does not go out; that light still shines on an old world, now feebly, now bright” (245). And this is the note she leaves us on, a reflection on the impact that small aesthetic experiences, which she associates with breath, air, lightning, and other weather concepts. She leaves us with pressure changes and with The Tree With the Lights In It.
Chapter VI

Learning in the Air

In the previous chapter, “Articulating the Aesthetic Experience Outdoors,” the introduction to our seven nature writers, we see that Abbey learns from the intensity of the sun, Ehrlich learns from the bitter cold, and Dillard learns from pressure fronts. Each of these aesthetic experiences in weather-rich environments epitomizes the painfulness and grittiness of this type of learning. Edward Abbey is jarred awake by the sun, Gretel Ehrlich contrasts the frozen north with inner human warmth, and Annie Dillard struggles with the atmospheric pressure and storms both inside her as existential reckoning and outside of her as life and death, from blindness to an affront of light.

In the present chapter, “Learning in the Air,” we explore a somewhat different data set from the remaining four writers: Henry David Thoreau, Mary Oliver, John Muir, and William Wordsworth. While Chapter V was about the struggle to articulate this complex learning experience investigated here, Chapter VI is the theoretical extension of direct experience to intelligent experiencing, or learning, now that we have some source of semi-articulation. It should be noted, however, that the division of these writers into two separate chapters is largely heuristic. Many of the themes challenge these two neat categories I have experimentally created. Actually, the themes overlap and flow into one another like raindrops trickling down separate and conjoined paths on a glass windowpane.

Another possible distinction that can be made in this second set of experiences is a curious emphasis on air, sky, and heavens. I sense a “looking up” about these writers and their experiences; there is a tone of revelation and reverie about. The writers are not preoccupied with
questions of what is around them or what is happening but instead how they might document it for future recovery. Thoreau nods to this naturalist-learner orientation:

So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express...or waiting at evening on the hilltops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something, though I never caught much, and that manna-wise, would dissolve again in the sun...my pains were their own reward. For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow-storms and rainstorms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes... (16)

As we have seen, Dillard also journals as a self-appointed inspector, but her written attitude harbors more gripping passion and frightening confusion than the quaint inquisitiveness that Thoreau’s exhibits. Even Thoreau’s humor casts an “airy” light on his writing. Muir and Wordsworth maintain a similar airiness in their lavish praise for the graces of the natural environment.

When I named this chapter, I was thinking of the phrase “love in the air.” We use those words ubiquitously in romantic notions of the atmosphere. But this chapter is not about feeling as pure romance, which we so often put at odds with rational thought. Learning is atmospheric just as love is, it permeates the atmosphere, and it affects our feelings and our actions. Learning, like love, even affects our physical bodies. Nothing is left untouched by air, and love in the air touches all. Learning in the air, then, is comparably omnipresent. This is the “high” experience of transformative learning. Like a love song, these nature writers express their experiences as weather ballads.
**Henry David Thoreau and Apricity**

*Apricity* is a conscious sensation of the warmth of the sun in winter. Comforting heat against a contrasting cold, and it comes from without, not within. This is an important factor that distinguishes my reading of Thoreau, I believe, as it is so common to hear the Romantic-era American Transcendentalists profiled as mystics or mentalists. In reality, they relied greatly on the extension of humanity as nature, or somewhat more accurately, the presence of non-human nature in our matured, transformed selves: the outside *reaching into us*. This is just what the weather does in philosopher-poet Henry David Thoreau’s most famous book *Walden*, it extends a hand for us to grasp or rebuke.

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148 As was customary in the previous chapter, within each subsection of Chapter VI the major nature writer and text featured will be cited in-text, unless otherwise noted.

149 Mooney, “Sympathy,” 82.
**Winter Warmth**

Ehrlich finds the tenderness of human communication in the shared breaths of cold air, puffs of hot condensation ballooning into a frigid atmosphere. Thoreau too finds an intimacy outdoors in the winter, *warmth*, and like Ehrlich, this is heat contrasted from bitter cold. The warmth of the sun in winter – apricity – is a red-hot finger pointing at us, a striking apposition with an otherwise icy day. However, theirs is not a heat generated from within human bodies, but from without. In this way, as I introduced earlier, Thoreau’s American Transcendentalist-Era tradition shines through his writing like a sunbeam reaching our exposed cheeks, spreading tingling heat to our extremities with such a delicate flush. The sun’s gift of apricity is a pleasantry of the social interaction of the human body with the earthly environment, as much a reminder of our non-human-like qualities, almost cold-blooded adaptability at times like a snake basking on a sunny rock, as well as our ability to commune with a non-living force like the energy of the heat of the sun.

It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life. I had previous seen the snakes in frosty mornings in my path with portions of their bodies still numb and inflexible, waiting for the sun to thaw them. (41)

Thoreau craves the social life of the outdoors, which is as much cognitively enriching, as it is physical and emotional. Consider, for example, the experience of immense relief one feels when being able to finally escape the office after a long day. Breaking into the light, and the moving air, and the freshness of a new space is a revitalization of our tired holistic selves. I argue that we need this uplifting outside world as much as we need the daily slog that provides us with our paycheck and our groceries.
Thoreau not only needs reprieve outdoors to famously “suck the marrow out of life” (93), he needs it to see friends that bring him joy, a joy that he feels is necessary to life. Joy is survival; desolation kills. Educators can relate to this, because it is the joy of learning that we believe extends the desire for growth and knowledge beyond compulsory classrooms. It is the joy of wonder and subsequent discovery that drives our passion to continue to learn, although learning can be just as easily crushed by depressive non-receptivity. The joy for learning is somewhat equivalent to the traveling bug: the more new people and new places and new cultures one encounters, the more one wants to forever be a global citizen, a traveler. It is self-sustaining apricity that allows Thoreau to continue traveling outdoors, joyfully drawing him out of his hermitage like a spring bear from her den:

I weathered some merry snow-storms, and spent some cheerful winter evenings by my fireside, while the snow whirled wildly without, and even the hooting of the owl was hushed...The elements, however, abetted me in making a path through the deepest snow in the woods, for when I had once gone through the wind blew the oak leaves into my tracks, where they ledged, and by absorbing the rays of the sun melted the snow, and so not only made me a bed for my feet, but in the night their dark line was my guide. (273)

Only one trail cutting was needed, then the wind and the sun kept Thoreau’s footprints in the snow deeper yet and hollowed out the excess snowflakes, and then in the shadows of the forest created by the moonlight defining the little boot-made canyons, his feet could still find their way in the dark holes by stepping into those dark plodded holes. Again, Thoreau initiates here a novel philosophical position: that apricity, weather, is warmth coming into us, impacting our lives from without. We are not generating this heat ourselves, just like Thoreau is not post-holing trails each day to keep his way cleared. The weather impacts us, a sensation that our controlling sensibilities and understanding of human agency can sometimes struggle to accept. But agency and
leadership is not absent in this aesthetic experience, even if other people are not present. Thoreau says that he still requires a “guide” on his way at night. Even if his own feet initially trod the trail, he cannot retain the path and follow it without a little natural aid from the sun and the wind and the moon-cast shadows.

This raises a challenge for philosophers as we struggle to find out “who” steps into this role: Is it man or weather that leads this inquiry? Does apricity draw Thoreau outside, or does Thoreau’s walking routine get him traveling? I think the only answer can be one of greater complexity, that both positions are needed. We cannot assume that weather controls our paths, nor that mankind chooses to walk a moonlit night without regard for the aesthetic qualities that enticed him there. Like any relationship or interaction in the world, this is not a one-sided propellant, both push back, even if in resistance. And again this seems correct for educators, who understand that learning is a reciprocal action between giving and receiving. The challenge in Western thought, however, is still the tendency to see humans as the origins, humans as the teachers. I believe Thoreau would say this is our bias for seeing humans as the primary source of intelligence. He argues for the air affecting us: “We should really be fed and cheered if when we met a man we were sure to see that some of the qualities which I have named, which we all prize more than those other productions, but which are for the most part broadcast and floating in the air, had taken root and grown in him” (173). Instead, let us flip this bias on its head, considering for a bit, the role of something “floating in the air” as the lessons that take root and grow in us.

Edward Mooney’s 2016 article in *The Concord Saunterer* is a great place for us to begin this philosophical reimagining in Thoreau’s snowy footsteps. In the essay “Walking” Thoreau refers to a unique range for knowledge and intelligence that Mooney analyzes for readers. Instead of treating knowledge as the highest attainment for mankind, Mooney explains that
Thoreau sees a spectrum of different kinds of intelligences infused in the world around us and within us. Rather than aiming to attain one particular state of complete knowledge, Thoreau suggests that we are best fulfilled by reading and assuming different intelligences: “My desire for knowledge is intermittent but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest we can attain to is not Knowledge but Sympathy with Intelligence.”¹⁵⁰ In *Walden’s* “Solitude” the world is said to be “an ocean of subtle intelligences. They are everywhere…they environ us on all sides” (141). And in his chapter “Spring” Thoreau says, “There lay the transparent pond already calm and full of hope as in a summer evening, reflecting a summer evening sky in its bosom, though none was visible overhead, as if it had intelligence with some remote horizon” (332).

Thoreau calls this process developing “Sympathy with Intelligence” as opposed to simply collecting “Knowledge.”¹⁵¹ This is an interesting and beneficial learning outlook for teachers in particular, because it highlights the process of receiving and training ourselves to recognize not just what looks right or truthful but things that strike us as beautiful, special, and real about the world. It broadens our aims not to a single star in the sky but to a constellation of global features. Mooney also poignantly quotes Emerson from “Self-Reliance,” noting how, “We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth.”¹⁵² This is compatible with my earlier conversation in the methods section entitled “Truth in Weather Talk,” as it aligns itself with an epistemology that honors practice in learning and progressive connectivity with the world and attachment to natural reality rather than ultimately intellectualistic or supernatural.


¹⁵¹ This is Mooney’s primary thesis in “Sympathy,” 63.

attainment.

Consequently, learning for Thoreau is not about finding some sort of experience in particular but in deeply attuning one’s self to the broad spectrum of intelligences, truths utterly present and available to grasp like warmth in winter. Mooney describes this epistemology – what I cannot help but see as learning – as “registering the presence of things.” For Mooney, as for Thoreau, “Snowdrifts have sparkling presence, sparkling genius,” and sympathetic students are summoned to “exercise receptivity to incoming genius or intelligence.”\(^{153}\) “Although beauty and the wondrous have immediacy—they strike us out of nowhere—the capacity to harvest the fruits of such moments requires alert training,” Mooney explains.\(^{154}\) It is then the teacher and the student’s responsibility to develop a disciplined practice of recognizing and accommodating different intelligences.

The weather makes its intelligence apparent, for example, in the electric charge of the air, even in winter. John Burroughs in “Winter Sunshine” highlights this literal spark we can experience on a cold day:

> It [electricity] is the life of the crystal, the architect of the flake, the fire of the frost, the soul of the sunbeam. The crisp winter air is full of it. When I come in at night after an all day tramp I am charged like a Leyden jar, my hair crackles and snaps beneath the comb like a cat’s back, and a strange, new glow diffuses itself through my system.\(^{155}\)

While we are accustomed to imagining electricity to occur in weather only during lightning storms, Burroughs is indeed scientifically accurate in his observation. An ionic charge is always


\(^{154}\) Ibid., 79.

\(^{155}\) Burroughs, 14, emphasis added.
present in our air, our atmosphere, even when the sun is brightly shining or the day is blisteringly cold. It is easy to presume that our “enlivenment” upon returning indoors after a brisk walk outside or recess is because of physical exertion and oxygen-infusing factors alone. As Burroughs adds, “It is impossible not to dilate and expand under such skies. One breathes deeply and steps proudly, and if he have any of the eagle nature in him it comes to the surface then.”

But Burroughs is not speaking of our classic clique presumption that nature is healthy for our bodies and minds, there is much more to this. He is saying that the sunbeam has a soul. In Plato’s view, souls are things that have innate intelligence, a priori knowledge.

Burroughs may be telling us that it is not our physical selves alone responding naturally to the energy of the sun or the charge in the air like plants react and green up to nitrogen before and during an onslaught of rain. Although the physiological and psychological science is indeed a portion of our reactionary “dilating,” he is also speaking of “expansion” and intelligent souls of the elements, which to me is a psalm of education. We are not simply filled up or rejuvenated by a jaunt outdoors. Our systems are taking on a new glow, a new persona, a new self. The experience in the elements, such as the experience of electric apricity, is about an expansion of our current selves.

Consider for a moment the many parallels between Thoreau’s philosophy of learning from the environment and Dillard’s experience of how The Tree With The Lights In It moved her. Dillard’s experience with the backlit tree was not an inside-only relationship, trapped in her intellectualist mind, but an interaction with the ways of the light that she was suddenly able to glimpse at that moment. She was startled by the reaction that something outside of her self could produce. She saw more than a pretty scene in front of her at sunset, and it was much more than a

\[156\] Ibid., 11.
healthy dose of daylight. The light that Dillard saw did more for her than regenerate her spirit and energy in the moment. It changed her outlook on what she saw and felt for years to come. This is surely transformative learning.

Thoreau recognizes the outward influence of the sun, just as a teacher might exert her energy on schooling a pupil, whether consciously or unconsciously shaping another life:

In spring the *sun not only exerts an influence* through the increased temperature of the air and earth, but its heat passes through ice a foot or more thick, and is reflected from the bottom in shallow water, and so also warms the water and melts the under side of the ice, at the same time that it is melting it more directly above, making it uneven, and causing the air bubbles which it contains to extend themselves upward and downward until it is completely honeycombed, and at last disappears suddenly in a single spring rain. (320, emphasis added)

The sun shapes and changes the ice, then lets the rain wipe it completely away, transforming it in form. How can we presume the sun does not do the same to us? It does – think of how our skin tans and becomes rough, think of skin cancer. Less physically, consider the delirium a too-bright sun can cause, as it does in Abbey – from the flicker of apricity to the scorching purge of a desert drought.

“Thuddering of the Pond”

Another prominent feature of Thoreau’s journal entries is the resonance of sound through air. This is exemplified in his description of the thuddering of the seasonal ice on Walden pond, which under the strain of the sun’s rays and the opposing cold of the water beneath, he describes how the sheath of ice is forced to warp and twist and sends resonant booms radiating through the air like a pulsing beat upon a drumhead (321). Thoreau notices that even the pond is as “sensitive to atmospheric changes as the globule of mercury in its [a thermometer’s] tube” (322).
We are like the ice on the pond, as humans, constantly changing forms inwardly and externally, reconfiguring with new cells every nanosecond, yet still remaining at heart the same general human shape. And like the water of the ice and the pond’s base, we rely on the air around us to resonate sounds, bouncing those wave lengths against us and other material objects like ping pong balls during a champion tournament. Thoreau notices this constant changing our matter and the sounds when the town bells ring through the woods, causing the air itself to take on a different tone.

All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale. The echo is, to some extent, an original sound, and therein is the magic and charm of it. It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph. (127-128)

It takes a keen musical ear indeed to notice such a resonance change when bells erupt or are silenced. Of course, we most can hear the bells themselves, but Thoreau is again highlighting the intelligence of the air around him, how even that air can change in an instant and mold to the actions around in. He does not hear the bells alone, but focuses on the reciprocal relationship of their sound with the natural environment. He says that “there came to him…a melody which the air had strained,” not that he just heard bells, but that those bells became something new in the air, and the air something new-sounding with those bells. He calls the echo an “original sound,” “partly the voice of the wood.” Like learning, the echo has materialized into something Thoreau has not yet known to exist. He has learned something unique about his space and how the air impacts his experience of it.
Environmental Choice

So much of what Thoreau argues about his outdoor experiences in *Walden* one could argue, however, is as possible indoors as it is out. We can hear beautiful sonatas, watch ice cubes shift in our water glasses, or notice the people around us change us into something special, influencing us and teaching us. I agree that all this is true. But the issue for Thoreau and me is not that the indoor life exists, but rather that we continue to have a choice about *more than one life*, starting with the deliberation between indoor and outdoor environments. Thoreau talks about this choice almost immediately in his book, about how the political and cultural environment in his day (and arguably in ours) preferences the most obvious luxuries of the indoors over the possibilities of the outdoors. Up until now with Thoreau, I have established with the aid of Edward Mooney, that learning outdoors is a process of training for sympathy with the intelligences of the elements. Put into simpler terms, this alternative to standard knowledge is what famous landscape artist Eric Sloane calls being “weather-wise.”[^157] From here, though, it is our work as philosophers of education to reconceive of where we ought to learn.

While learning in general and these particular aesthetic experiences that I reflect upon from nature writings are so often unsolicited, as Dewey would say “indirect” influences of the environment, we can indeed utilize our own intelligences to direct them into becoming more regular occurrence. For this reason, we must consider the issue of modern American classrooms being primarily indoors: if we train for indoor learning almost exclusively, how can we expect to make outdoor learning commonplace? Or, as Thoreau writes, “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (144). Thoreau’s two year excursion to Walden Pond was a choice, and a deliberate one at that, which he talks about at

[^157]: Sloane, 3.
great length in the book’s introduction. Likewise, the choice must be made explicit to educators: that there is more than one learning environment, and that there is power to choose to learn different lessons from the world. Thoreau’s perspective on our default choice is plain: “There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness” (354).

It would be unfair to characterize any of our classrooms as incredibly “dull,” but we can imagine that children cooped up indoors must think like that at times, even in the most vivid indoor environment. There is so much choice in actuality, so many options, that Thoreau thinks perhaps we have come to narrow them down in our minds by cutting out the most challenging options: “When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessaries and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear” (6-7). When so much time has passed, culturally and historically, without a major curricular environment revision, it is understandable to feel that other possibilities are simply not valid.158 However, we can find in the literature, in the “alert and healthy natures” of others, or even in our selves as children running wild in our backyards or parks, that the sun rose clear.159 Other options are available, and they are upon us, shining brightly.

In Thoreau’s most characteristic bluntness, Americans, as residents of a first-world country are “not simply kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot; …they are cooked, of course à la mode” (12). We cannot keep cooking our students, even with a side of ice cream to

158 “The greatest gains and values are farthest from being appreciated. We easily come to doubt if they exist. We soon forget them. They are the highest reality.” Thoreau, 232.

159 “Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay outdoors, even in wet and cold. It plays house…” Ibid., 27.
cool them off! There was indeed a time for choosing to build walls around us, even Thoreau admits (26). He is not asking us to give up shelter and basic needs, rather, to “consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary. I have seen Penobscot Indians, in this town, living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a foot deep around them, and I thought that they would be glad to have it deeper to keep out the wind” (27-28). Thoreau is asking instead for us to reimagine human “richness” and “necessity” and to find that both can be equally served outdoors (32). He redefines what it means to be American by calling us to “grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and brakes, which will never become English bay. Let the thunder rumble; what if it threatens ruin to farmers’ crops? That is not its errand to thee. Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds...” (222).

Re-Valuing Weather: An Ethics of Aesthetics (Not About Mere Admiration)

The previous section ended with only a partial quote, but it is best not to finish there but instead here, in this section about the re-valuing of weather. Thoreau continues by saying, “…Enjoy the land but own it not” (222). Herein his tone shifts not to a call for action (“go outside”) but a call for thought. Again, for Thoreau, learning is not a matter of owning. We can learn from the sky, but we cannot own it. We can hear the ice thunder on Walden Pond, but we cannot claim to cause it or control it. While the last subsection spoke of environmental choice, here I speak of the evaluation that lies behind each choice we make. I say “evaluation” as in “each-one’s valuation,” an evaluation and valuation of the options before us, because humans insert and exude value in the choices we make. Sunlight itself does not discriminate; it sheds its light without reservation for all life to grow by it (74). We are the pickers.
Choice is not about either-or options, and it is not about dichotomizing our world into the inside versus outside. For Thoreau even, a balance must be reached. He completes his ethical choice of living environment by returning to town – not for the purpose of never venturing outside ever again, but to share what he has learned from his immersive experience with other people and to have the best of both options. Thoreau is called to return “indoors” as much as he was called “outdoors” in the first place: his vocational bent is a calling to harmonious balance, not biased isolation. We owe our time to our selves and the non-human world to communicate with a world outdoors, and we owe time to society and the indoors for our safety and the preservation of our species and human-centric culture. Abbey, Ehrlich, Dillard, Thoreau, Oliver, Muir and Wordsworth – each one of them oscillates between living indoors and out. It is the extremes that seem ethically problematic.

Lives worth living must be lives of learning and growth, joy and hardship. The differentiation brings us fulfillment. As such, going outdoors cannot be merely a case of spending time out, or adventure, or recreation alone. Although elemental exposure is a part of the equation, ethically, it is not sufficient in itself for a life of flourishing. This is what we have so problematically assumed by showing with science only that one aspect of us is touched outdoors: either health, or aesthetics, or leisure. We must see the complete opportunities available to re-value the non-human environment appropriately. Moreover, as I argue here, we need to add theorization and research that reveals the multifaceted experience of learning outdoors. Nature is not a drug to be swallowed and cured by; it is a holistic experience of living that we must recognize and explore further. As a process of social change, however, this cannot happen without first being exposed to weather. Thoreau unfolds this same ethical stance in *Walden* when he writes:
Such is oftenest the young man’s introduction to the forest, and the most original part of himself. He goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and fish-pole behind. The mass of men are still and always young in this respect...Commonly they did not think that they were lucky, or well paid for their time, unless they got a long string of fish, thought they had the opportunity of seeing the pond all the while. They might go there a thousand times before the sediment of fishing would sink to the bottom and leave their purpose pure; but no doubt such a clarifying process would be going on all the while. (228)

Thoreau here likens aesthetic education to the recreational fishing making eventual outdoorsmen. Like slipping carrot pulp into a sugary fruit drink, we bring goodness and ethical rationale into an experience only once we develop a taste for it. This, again, is why the aesthetic experience of being present in weather is in itself a “clarifying process...going on all the while.” When the experienced outdoorsperson is caught under a deluge or feel the touch of apricity on their skin, it is impossible to end the moment with only a thought for beauty. The mind and body rolls from one feeling to another – from musing to musing – from pondering to intelligence.

When we value the non-artificial environment, we cannot stop at valuing it for its beauty but also for its intelligence. This is the goal to be reached. In Thoreau’s words, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach” (93). Thoreau did not just say, “I went to the woods, because I found it to be pretty.” And he returned with much more than a “taste” for the aesthetics of nature. He “grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been” (116). We have the ability to do more than look, touch, or taste. Aesthetics are a human gateway to ethics.

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a
particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of the arts. (92-93)

While I would argue further that there is value inherent in non-human nature itself, just as there is inherent value in art, it is indeed also worth noting Thoreau’s understanding of human agency as powerfully able to interpret something differently – hopefully more accurately – and shaping an experience from aesthetic to ethic. The human ability to choose environments, to choose ethically, and to dig deeper into an experience is marvelous indeed.¹⁶⁰

Just a few last points about Thoreau’s ethics of environmental choice and learning outdoors remain. First, for Thoreau, virtue is measured by weather, as even the wind can move the earth: “The virtues of a superior man are like the wind; the virtues of a common man are like the grass – the grass, when the wind passes over it, bends” (183) We build ethical lives by building our selves in our element. There is no metaphor in this; Thoreau means it as he says it.¹⁶¹ Second, as was the case for Abbey, we receive answers of a sort from weather just as we might from a clever teacher: through subtlety and inquiry. Thoreau reveals this in his own experience of waking up with an eye out his window:

After a still winter night I awoke with the impression that some question had been put to me, which I had been endeavoring in vain to answer in my sleep, as what – how – when – where? But there was dawning Nature, in whom all creatures live, looking in at my broad windows with serene and satisfied face, and no question on her lips. I awoke to an answered question, to Nature and daylight. The snow


¹⁶¹ Thoreau, Walden, 114. “…We are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor… The rays which stream through the shutter will no longer be remembered when the shutter is wholly removed.”
lying deep on the earth dotted with young pines, and the very slope of the hill on which my house is placed, seemed to say, Forward! (301)

Thoreau cites Nature as his interlocutor, but if we look closely, who or what is actually responding to him? It was the dawning light that looked into his abode: daylight. Also, in that daylight his answer comes from “the snow lying deep on the earth.” Weather is responding on behalf of Nature.

Lastly, I was struck by yet another common experience in reading *Walden* that correlates with my earlier subsection in the previous chapter, titled “Clarity and Drugs.” Like Abbey, Thoreau also was “high” on the weather, noting how he should "prefer the natural sky to an opium-eater’s heaven…Of all ebriosity, who does not prefer to be intoxicated by the air he breathes?” (232). One might conclude that many things from such a note, but I think Mooney brings this rumpus to order best by recalling that philosophers often struggle with how to “categorize” Thoreau, whether as a mystic or a field-reporter, as if either were wholly exclusive.\(^\text{162}\)

As explained by Mooney, though, even “Scientists love or are stoical or defensive about their work and their place in the world. They wake up, as all of us do, in foul or cloudy or buoyant moods, with aches in their limbs or hearts, with a sense of attachment or alienation from others close to them and their work—sometimes attuned to natural splendors, sometimes not.”\(^\text{165}\)

Mooney offers the reminder that “reminder that valorizations of knowledge at the expense of sublimity, reverie, and poetry bury all hope for valuing – or understanding -- Sympathy with

\(^\text{162}\) Mooney, “Sympathy,” 82.

\(^\text{163}\) Ibid., 84.
Intelligence, and bury all hope to have worlds laced with sublimity, reverie, and poetry. From that we might conclude that there is a tenuous tie between brilliance and metaphysical disassociation that should not be automatically avoided because of this risky connection, as being “high on life” may be a property of such high-level growth or transformation.

Mary Oliver and Petrichor

Mary Oliver is one of only two contemporary authors included in my data set (the other being Annie Dillard), and although she does not have the longevity of a nature writer dead some one hundred years, or made famous by a lifetime of published works, she has published an impressive array of nature poetry. Up to the date that I am writing this, 2018, Oliver has published at the rate of about one book every three years since her first poetry anthology in 1963, when she was just 28 years old. Maxine Kumin, former Poet Laureate Consultant to the Library of Congress, famously called her the “indefatigable guide to the natural world.” It is no wonder then that in perusing her vast collection of anthologies and poems I struggled to select only the few that most correlated with weather-related themes. Moreover, I specifically identified weather poems that spoke of learning and transformation incited by outdoor experience.

What I found was a startling number of direct references by Mary Oliver to the outdoor aesthetic experience that this dissertation is most concerned with describing. Among the weather themes I found were notes on scents on air, vanishing into and delighting in transformative metamorphosis, and breaking open the hidden depth. Most commonly, these themes were

164 Ibid., 79.
accompanied by a rich connection between Oliver at the fragrant earth after a stormy day, what botanists, naturalists, and poets call petrichor.

**Vanishing, Serious Delight, and Transformation**

Out of these seven nature writers, if there were one that made a life out of noticing this unique aesthetic experience, it was the poet Mary Oliver. Her poetry is famous for showing her touch and grace with nature, and for the demonstration of the very detailed attentiveness Oliver took to the natural world around her. Although I expected that poetry would be the most obscure versions I would find of aesthetic experience – that the poetry itself would be so thick with metaphor that I would have to hack through the brambles to discover the learning – surprisingly, Oliver is arguably the most literal writer of the group. She openly recognizes her objectives when she writes, “Ten times a day something happens to me like this – some strengthening throb of amazement – some good sweet empathic ping and swell. This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness” (“Low Tide,” 34). This attention to phenomenological presence is immediately evident in three of her poems, which I share nearly in full form here for proper illustration of this point.

The first example is from an excerpt of Oliver’s poem “Sleeping In The Forest.” She writes:

...All night
I heard the small kingdoms breathing
around me, the insects, and the birds
who do their work in the darkness. All night
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling
with a luminous doom. By morning
I had vanished at least a dozen times
into something better. (*Twelve Moons*, 3)
At first she stages the outdoor setting as a time when she purportedly slept in the forest. She talks about the tiny insects and birds around her being awake and alive but out of sight. One can imagine, perhaps, how frightening this might seem, hearing something that cannot be seen in the dark, like specters or wild predators. Oliver, however, notices these things as “kingdoms breathing,” worlds alive beyond her own. She can hear the creatures at work while she is supposed to be asleep; she is witness to an insider’s nocturnal empire. We have come to be quite familiar with breath as a theme in the nature writers already examined for this research, namely breathing cold air as visible communication for Ehrlich, breath as the processing of reflective thought for Dillard, and air as the favorite intoxicating inhalant for Thoreau. It should come as no surprise then, that Oliver often refers to breath.

To “rise and fall, as if in water” as Oliver writes, could be interpreted plainly as a restless sleep, twisting upright and then prone again like an ocean wave, or it could be that her body stayed put but her memory of the night was one that sent her mind bending and waning like swelling water. The “luminous doom” might be the luminary sunrise on the horizon or the contrast she felt to the darkness and the non-human others skittering around her. One gets the feeling that Oliver means this to have been a long and trying night. And she awakes not to the same state that she came to the night outdoors, but having passed through the thick only to “vanish” and to reappear as something “better.”

This experience smacks of the taste of learning. Immediately coming to mind at the word “vanish” is the concept of *aporia* – blankness, utter loss. As I have established previously, this is the Socratic first phase of transformative learning. Oliver’s night in the forest, sleeping in the darkness, privy to other non-human kingdoms turns into an experience of losing herself only to
find in the morning a better Mary Oliver. Like sublimation for Dillard, Oliver’s human matter changes shape in the night outdoors.

The second example is one that can only be seen in full form. In her poem “Snow Geese,” Oliver tells another story of a transformative outdoor experience. Although, like the last, this one also involves a non-human “other,” she is clearer in this poem as to the connection that she is making to that other, and how it, and the experience, affects her long-term. As she recalls this, we discover that the moment itself was very brief, but as we shall discuss in the next subsection, it is an aesthetic experience that physically and mentally lingers, similar to Dillard’s Tree With the Lights In It:

Oh, to love what is lovely, and will not last!
    What a task
to ask
of anything, or anyone,
yet it is ours,
    and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.
One fall day I heard
    above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was
a flock of snow geese, winging it
    faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden. I
held my breath
as we do

sometimes
to stop time
when something wonderful
has touched us

as with a match
which is lit, and bright,  
but does not hurt
in the common way,

but delightfully,
as if delight
were the most serious thing
you ever felt.

The geese
flew on.
I have never
seen them again.

Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won’t.
It doesn’t matter.
What matters

is that, when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil,
secretly, joyfully, clearly.

(Why I Wake Early, 34-35, original formatting)

The sun in Oliver’s poem has turned the white feathers of the migrating snow geese into golden fingers. It is so astoundingly beautiful that Oliver stops breathing to try to stop time itself, to freeze the geese in the air and enjoy them a bit longer. An expression of the aesthetic of beauty may have been her attraction to the moment, but the experience is so stunning she finds it sufficient in and of itself. It was a one-off wonder, which she is perfectly pleased to accept after her initial reluctance when the birds are still in sight. Oliver saw what she needed, although it might have been delightful to see it for more time. It was not only the beauty (even in its brevity) that touched her, but the pleasing realization that she really saw the snow geese as if they had just been created, so fresh and alive.165

A trick with Oliver’s “Snow Geese” is that is seems clear that she is having an outdoor aesthetic experience of beauty that affects her with some longevity, and that weather is present in

165 I suspect she is referring to the historical Veil of Isis, the Greek God of Nature who likes to hide. For an illuminating philosophical discussion of this ancient history, which has already been referenced several times in this dissertation, see Hadot, Veil.
the form of the sunlight refracted off the white geese feathers, but her learning from this moment
is not literally stated. I do not think this should be read as a conscious absence on her part.
Learning was involved, and it was more transformative than her poem’s simple description offers
at face value. As with any poem, the author means it to be read deeply, carefully, and vividly.
Like Stanley Cavell argues in his book *The Senses of Walden*, a meticulous writer like Thoreau,
or in this case Mary Oliver, does not mean for any meaning to be over-simplified by prose. On
this basis of this logical and methodological stance, and in recognition that the tradition of nature
writing is laden with metaphor, both apparent and extended, I am encouraged to look deeper for
the learning in her moment with the geese and the light.

To aid in our understanding of Oliver’s overarching philosophy of outdoor aesthetic
experience, we can look to an excerpt “Clouds” in *Why I Wake Early*:

\[
\text{…a transformation, not a vision, not an answer, not a proof, but I put it there, close against my heart, where the need is, and it serves the purpose. I go on, soaked through, my hair slicked back; like corn, or wheat, shining and useful. (22)}
\]

Being in the rain in this poem, standing exposed under the clouds, Oliver tells of how she
undergoes a transformation, not just as vision but a proof of some philosophical truth I
presume.\(^{166}\) Her language radiates with synonyms of resolve: proof, purpose, and use. Now if we

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\(^{166}\) Robin Wall Kimmerer shares an incredibly similar story of being out in the rain in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 295. “After hours in the penetrating rain, I am suddenly damp and chilled and the path back to the cabin is a temptation. I could so easily retreat to tea and dry clothes, but I cannot pull myself away. However alluring the thought of warmth, there is no substitute for standing in the rain to awaken every sense – senses that are muted within four walls, where my attention would be on me instead of all that is more than me. Inside looking out… I don’t want to just be a bystander to rain, passive and protected; I want to be part of the downpour, to be soaked, along
come to know Oliver’s language for transformational experience as characteristically calling upon firm and dogged words like these, a reread of “Snow Geese” can begin to shed light on how learning occurs in her aesthetic experiences outdoors. Oliver takes delight very seriously. Aesthetic experiencing and the joy that it brings her is not of insignificant value. In fact, I would add, delight can be much more – delight can be evidence of learning. When we take a closer look we find that this is indeed the case in “Snow Geese.”

Oliver says how “something wonderful has touched her as with a match which is lit and bright.” Here is our trusty metaphor of light and learning again. A match is a useful thing, especially if it does not burn us and vibrantly lights our way. With this missing information, wrapped cleanly in a common metaphor of learning, we can begin to connect the three parts of the transformative learning puzzle: aesthetic experience, the weather, and holistic learning. Unfortunately, Oliver does not tell us about holistic transformation in just one experience, one poem. The manifold learning picture requires a collection of her moments to see how, as time passes, her aesthetic experiences in a weather-rich environment continue to teach her by diverse means. This is the uniqueness of learning outdoors; the broad spectrum of body/mind transformations it can deliver.

While we can develop a comparably varied curriculum indoors, it is just as likely and profitable to instead challenge our base choices of school environments. Moreover, there still remain two reasons why a weather-rich environment may prove to be richer: first, it resists the anthropocentric drive for humans to build and control things, highlighting instead the Thoreauvian inherent intelligences of nature, and it stands to potentially change the American

with the dark humus that squishes underfoot. I wish that I could stand like a shaggy cedar with rain seeping into my bark, that water could dissolve the barrier between us. I want to feel what the cedars feel and know what they know.”
social perspective on climate change. Imagine a world where students grow up aesthetically
learning in weather, see the value of a stable environment, and celebrate the eco-centric elements
of our lives. We shall revisit these summative arguments in this dissertation’s final chapter. For
now, however, we return to Oliver for those various dimensions of transformative learning that I
alluded to in the previous paragraph.

In the poem “Mindful,” Oliver is suddenly forthright with her philosophical
understanding of weather as educative. Her aesthetic moments do not need to be dramatic and
sublime, she explains. Just as Kierkegaard claims there is an “ordinary sublime” and Dewey talks
of the importance of primary experience, so too does Oliver harken upon the common
experiences that indirectly teach.167

Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant –
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these –
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean’s shine,…
(Why I Wake Early, 58-59, original formatting)

The unique thing about Oliver’s “ordinary sublime,” however, is how she likens these wisdom-
built teachings to “the untrimmable light of the world” and the “shine” of the ocean. Light

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167 Much gratitude to Edward Mooney for reminding me of Kierkegaard’s reference to an
ordinary sublime in Fear and Trembling,
and shining weather features are used in the form of an analogy, not a metaphor here, so she does not mean to use them to define the teachings. This is only a literary tool, not a truth. But where did these weather references come from, if they did not somehow hold some representative value, some natural connection to the process of “growing wise?”

It is prudent to also note now that if you look at a list of Oliver’s book titles, you will find one called House of Light. Here, again, is the metaphor of light used. Keep scanning her publications and another book-long poem is named The Leaf and the Cloud. This title alludes to Ruskin’s famous quote that “between the earth and man arose the leaf, between the heaven and man came the cloud.” Elsewhere, in “Wind,” Oliver collapses in the fields, exasperated by explanations…unless of course those explanations are delivered by the weather:

I am tired of explanations. Unless they are spoken by the best mouth…Or the voice of the wind itself, flailing out of any and every quarter of the sky.

Especially in summer. Especially in the fields, close to the ground. Listen! Let the high branches go on with their opera, it’s the song of the fields I wait for, when the sky turns orange and the wind arrives, waving his thousand arms. Or, autumn! I hurry out to the middle of the field and stand where the tough goldenrod, seeded and tasseled, is vigorously tossing – until something thankful rises from my own body. The goldenrod lashes back and forth, each stem on its knuckled foot. Yes! Yes! Yes! And then the dry earth begins to anticipate, and then I fall to my knees, and then the flowers cry out, and then the wind breaks open its silver countries of rain. (What Do We Know, 19)

When the wind brings the rain, she cries out, relieved to hear it, to feel it. Yes! Yes! Yes! She is thankful for the weather talking to her instead. If Oliver can metaphorically say that the weather has explanations, then we can more easily interpret her to believe that the weather has some sort of innate wisdom. This may be an excellent example of Oliver holding sympathy with the intelligence of the wind.
Brief But Lingering, Like a Scent

When Oliver talks about the wind drawing in the rain in the field, she mentions that the “dry earth begins to anticipate” the quenching moisture and the flowers and her welcome it too. In thinking of my own experience in rain, when the dry earth finally gets its long-overdue drink, and the flowers rehydrate, there is a scent that always accompanies that experience. The scent is one of rich iron minerals in the soil mixed with wet leaves and pollen, and it is known as petrichor.

Like Oliver’s ordinary sublime, this scent which lingers but can only be detected briefly when the air rises and the humidity meets it with a delicate swirling rhythm and dance of fragrance, turns an everyday delight of rain into a quite extraordinary aesthetic experience. Oliver is a master of identifying these small eccentricities in her poetry. Take, for instance, “Early Snow,” which mentions both petrichor and sublimity:

And I turned
and opened the door, and still the snow poured down
smelling of iron and the pale, vast eternal, and
there it was, whether I was ready or now:
the silence; the blank, white, glittering sublime.
(What Do We Know, 56-57. Original formatting, emphasis added)

Breaking Open

One final theme from Mary Oliver that I believe stands as evidence that outdoor aesthetic experiences in weather can transform us in various ways, are her many poems that describe an experience of breaking open while outdoors. Surely, this is a thinly veiled metaphor for transformative learning. In “Lightning” Oliver speaks of the body’s desire to run for safety but also to gravitate toward the fiery danger, like the common experiences humans have at a cliff
edge of feeling propelled forward, as if determined to commit suicide for the surreal instant pleasure of flying (*American Primitive*, 7-9). As in Thoreau, we get a sense again of the delicate line between brilliance and metaphysical dissociation, or even madness in this case. But fear does not prevail – “excitement shouts,” she says.

This experience of lightning reappears for Oliver like Dillard’s Tree With the Lights In it:

```
then lightning
slammed down

and opened the tree –
the way a tooth would open a flower.
I fell down

and there I will be,
for one last moment,
broken but burning,
like a golden tree.
(“Rain, Tree, Thunder and Lightning,” *West Wind*, 31)
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How poignant! Also, how very coincidental when viewed beside Dillard’s metaphor of The Tree With the Lights In It. We might deduce that there is more to these shared experiences than mere happenstance. And once more lightning shoots down from the sky and breaks open the body of a tree:

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All afternoon it rained, then
such power came down from the clouds
on a yellow thread,
as authoritative as God is supposed to be.
When it hit the tree, her body
opened forever.
(“Rain,” *Wild Geese*, 66)
```

As is characteristic of transformative learning, a rupture, a split, an affront of light, or a shift has taken place in the experience described in this poem. The lightning struck the tree with such force that she opened up forever. Who opened? The tree opened, which is Oliver.
William Wordsworth and the Breath of God

We transition now from a contemporary poet to a classical one, and the only non-American among the seven selected canonical nature writers: William Wordsworth. Although I focus in this research on an American context, there is a very particular reason for my choice of Wordsworth for this project. It was in reading an article about Wordsworth, suggested by David Hansen, that I first came upon his concept of “spots of time,” which bears an uncanny resemblance to the outdoor aesthetic transformative learning experience that is the subject of this dissertation.

My discussion of Wordsworth is named after a combination of two phrases from The Prelude: first, from a line where Wordsworth dedicates his work to Nature (his original capitalization should be noted), “This verse is dedicate [sic] to Nature's self, …And things that teach as Nature teaches...” and second, Nature is introduced as the Breath of God.168 Wordsworth’s wind theme grows throughout the poem, but is carried right from the start (46, 1.335-340).

Thoughts Steeped in Feeling

Up until now we have discussed transformative outdoor aesthetic learning experiences without fully conceptualizing how aesthetic learning, beyond Brady’s Kantian conception in the second chapter describes the role of reason in sublime experiencing. However, as Mooney points out that Thoreau sees Sympathies with Intelligences rather than only one source of Knowledge in

168 162, 5.230-231. 162, 5.223. Unless otherwise stated, all Wordsworth references in this subsection are from The Prelude: 1805 edition. Scholars of Wordsworth will recognize that I choose this early version of his work, because pressure from religious affiliates led Wordsworth to later revise much of The Prelude, removing his many and bold allusions to pantheism, or God as Nature. Peter Larkin writes smartly on Wordsworth’s influences and edits.
the world, Wordsworth has a systematic argument in *The Prelude* that aesthetic feelings are intelligent thoughts.\(^{169}\) Take, for instance, Wordsworth in speaking of a child innately connected to Nature, “...For feeling has to him imparted strength, And -- powerful in all sentiments of grief, Of exultation, fear and joy-- his mind” (78, 2.263-271). This passage indicates that aesthetic feeling has made the child not weaker but more robust through her emotional learning. Are these child’s emotions, though, linked only to the feelings of the body? No, Wordsworth writes, the mind is also improved. Although we might understand this equally well in terms of mind/body dualism, I would implore us to consider that the body and the mind, feelings and thoughts, are all one in the same form of the broader categories of “intelligences.” A similar argument is made by philosopher of education Paul Standish in his article “Knowing in Feeling.” Citing Cavell, Standish explains that “what is at stake here is not reducible to information” because from an experience of feeling we receive thoughts that linger and can be easily brought to mind again, we feel their lessons without having to touch something concrete again and again.\(^{170}\) From Standish and Cavell the importance of knowledge learned through feeling is laid bare, so what I suggest here and in Chapter III is an intuition of the truth in what precisely we experience.

Humans have the ability to use aesthetic experience just as we use thought – as sources of knowledge – and as such it is not out of bounds to think that Wordsworth may bind them

\(^{169}\) Wordsworth chooses the very same phrase as Thoreau, "...the sky, Never before so beautiful, sank down…daily were my sympathies enlarged, And thus the common range of visible things, Grew dear to me..." (74, 2.178-183).

\(^{170}\) Standish, 303.
together as modes of learning.\textsuperscript{171} Moreover, as modes of learning, aesthetics experiences are privy to the same kind of earthly, serious truths discussed in Chapter III.

\begin{verbatim}
...I transferred
My own enjoyments, or, the power of truth
Coming in revelation, I conversed
With things that really are, I at this time
Saw blessings spread around me like a sea.
Coercing all things into sympathy…
...and now at length
From Nature and her overflowing soul
I had received so much that all my thoughts
Were steeped in feeling. I was only then
Contented when with bliss ineffable
I felt the sentiment of being spread
O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still...\textsuperscript{172}
\end{verbatim}

From Nature, Wordsworth has transferred what he has enjoyed as “truth” or “coming in revelation.” In Nature he “conversed with things that really are,” which I take to be his description of his new truths, and from Nature he feels he has been given things, received truth, and received so much all his thoughts became “steeped in feeling.” All that Wordsworth had learned from Nature was bound with emotion, and filled a range of feeling in the metaphor of an English tea bag soaking in water. Notice how a main ingredient in steeping tea is water, an atmospheric element, and a part of the weather. He is equating his thoughts simmering in feelings to a bag of tea immersed in elemental liquid. It is fitting, of course, that he offers this metaphor in gratitude for the gifts or lessons given to him while he was himself steeped in Nature, in the weather. When Wordsworth mentions truth as a coming to light of “things that

\textsuperscript{171} Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess explicitly argues that there is interplay between reason and feeling in learning in his chapter fittingly titled, “You Can Learn Properly Only What Engages Your Feelings.”

\textsuperscript{172} Wordsworth, 86, 2.409-417. Emphasis added. Like Thoreau, Wordsworth further develops his sympathy with non-human things.
really are” and being in conversation with those truthful things, I am reminded of Willa Cather’s words in *The Professor’s House*:

> The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Whenever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him… He was earth, he would return to earth. When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails and when the seven pine-trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: “That is right.” Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his path, he said: “That is it.” When the maple-leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch, – like the skin on an old face, – he said: “That is true; it is time.” (241)

Wordsworth’s concept of truth in Nature is like that of Cather’s Kansas boy. He observes the earth as it is, the weather as it shows itself, the passing of the seasons as the telling of time. This is truth, as I have explained in Chapter III, in a serious way. The gravity of the gravitational life on this planet, the reality in our experiences, as they are felt, thought, and learned. Wordsworth’s overlap of Nature, the weather, and basic learning principles appear in his passage: “With life and Nature, purifying thus, The elements of feeling and of thought, And sanctifying by such discipline, Both pain and fear, until we recognize, A grandeur in the beatings of the heart” (50, 1.436-441). It is the role of life and Nature (capitalized by Wordsworth, like a teacher), to “purify the elements of feeling and of thought,” and through this practice Wordsworth believes that we find what is great about the human heart or human nature. Again, feeling and thought are metaphorically “elements” and we find ourselves in their clarification.

In another of Cather’s novels, *My Antonia*, the narrator tells the story of a poignant classroom lecture on Virgil’s *Aeneid*, recalling that after the talk, “We left the classroom quietly,
conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling." This is not a foreign notion but a common experience shared by learners, that of being conscious of a great feeling that shifts and moves something within us. Transformative learning is as much a feeling as it is a turn of thought.

It is especially valuable to posit feelings as the same as thoughts in education, because it is through aesthetic experience of Nature, Wordsworth believes, that we learn to love mankind.  

With deep devotion, Nature, did I feel
...what I owed to thee:
High thoughts of God and man, and love of man,
...For I already had been taught to love
My fellow-beings, to such habits trained
Among the woods and mountains, where I found
In thee a gracious guide to lead me forth
Beyond the bosom of my family...
Love human to the creature in himself.
(270, 272, 8.63-76)

Above all
Did Nature bring again this wiser mood,
More deeply reestablished in my soul,..
...early tutored me
To look with feelings of fraternal love
Upon those unassuming things that hold
A silent station in this beauteous world. (440, 12.45-53)

Nature tutored Wordsworth in Sympathy for Intelligences, Thoreau might say (supported also by the previously quoted passage of The Prelude, 86, 2.409-417). How does Nature teach and what

173 Cather, Antonia, 198.

174 This is made conveniently plain in Wordsworth’s choice of title for Book Eight: "Retrospect: Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind."
subjects? Nature teaches aesthetically, through and about feelings of excitation and calm,

Wordsworth clarifies:

> From Nature doth emotion come, and moods
> Of calmness equally are Nature's gift:
> ...peace and excitation...
> That energy by which he seeks the truth,
> Is rouzed, aspires, grasps, struggles, wishes, craves
> From her that happy stillness of the mind
> Which fits him to receive it when unsought. (438, 12.9-14)

What is Nature, and where is she? Nature is in the wilds of the wind, and she gives to Wordsworth an admiration of humanity.

...like those wilds
In which my early feelings had been nursed,
And naked valleys full of caverns, rocks,
And audible seclusions, dashing lakes,
Echoes and waterfalls, and pointed crags
That into music touch the passing wind.
...And the result was elevating thoughts
Of human nature. (308, 8.791-802)

Through non-human Nature, silences, echoes and the voice of the wind, Wordsworth comes to appreciate human nature. Interestingly, Wordsworth says that Nature brings both stimulation (“seeking truth”) and a still mind, allowing learning to occur even if unprovoked. Like Thoreau, intelligence in this way is a gift we must prepare to receive even if we are not actively seeking it. This does not mean that learning only comes in spontaneous apparition, on windy days or in cavernously cold valleys, but it does honor that a particular type of learning, aesthetic learning, does happen in those kinds of moments. Similar experiences may happen in a museum, on the train, or in a formal classroom, but those are not feelings and thoughts from Nature, and they are not (I would argue) weather-rich. The honor of learning from non-human elements is
spectacular, as I have posited through these evidential nature writings, as it expands transformative learning experience to an outdoor space and identifies a new, direct teacher – and an important player in the learning experience – Nature herself. (Before I have called this learning from non-human others.) If Nature brings us closer to the truths of her own intelligences, the things Cather’s character called “what is it,” maybe she also brings us closer to the ethics of the world, both human nature and non-human nature, or as the boy said, “what is right.” There is a material truth about the world in Wordsworth’s concept of learning by Nature, and there is an ethical lesson to be learned as well.

**Nature and God**

What is Nature? Is it Her? Him? Existence, a being, a body? In my many years of studying outdoor learning, I cannot seem to work out the details. As explained in my research methods chapters, I find this term all at once poetic, historical, and troubling, and I am not alone in setting it aside for the time being. While I would not choose to pursue this research solely from the perspective of a concept wrought with centuries of miscommunications, there is an important position for Nature in Wordsworth’s philosophy of outdoor aesthetic learning. Although I am not convinced that Wordsworth’s original 1805 poem had a singular Nature in mind, it becomes evident through Wordsworth’s literary critiques and subsequent revisions that the religious culture of England in his time did not allow for grandiose references of any sort to a pantheistic nature-based God, or worse yet, support for paganism from such a popular writer. For example, he hears the whispers in the wind: "...I would stand, Beneath some rock, listening to sounds that are, The ghostly language of the ancient earth, Or make their dim abode in distant winds...” (82, 2.326-330). Consequently, when Wordsworth returned to his poem *The Prelude*
after arduous critical review, Nature was replaced in almost exclusively with God. And as such, what was once Nature’s wind speaking to Wordsworth, later editions of *The Prelude* welcomed as the “breath of God” in her stead.

This expansive revision of what was once a naturalistic ballad then became a spiritual hymn. Although in words, Wordsworth may have become less brazen, the ideas of Nature and of Wordsworth’s Nature as communing with or even as a perfect match for God, does not decrease the importance of Nature for learning. In fact, knowing that Wordsworth later exchanged, or more accurately, supplemented Nature with God, tells us only more strongly of the pivotal role Nature plays in our lives and learning. The Anglican God of the British Romantic era was powerful and foreboding, but also a parental, filial relation. This is the same persona that Nature assumes in that time period: a transition from the old Renaissance Nature of fear and risk to Romantic safety and embrace.\(^{175}\) Wordsworth, between *The Prelude’s* different versions, flutters between these two dynamic identities of the human versus the other-than-human, Nature and Man, God and Man. When the wind blows across the fields, God breathes life into us. Even without a strong belief in God, this is a clearly metaphorical presentation of the hero/heroine Nature/God as teacher for Wordsworth, which should pique any philosophy of education’s interests.

Spirituality in education is a taboo subject these days, but I say again that there is a deep seriousness in Wordsworth’s incomplete philosophy of Nature as God that draws attention to the

\(^{175}\) Similar language is used by John Muir, a student of British Romanticism: “How fine the weather is! Nothing more celestial can I conceive. How gently the winds blow! Scarce can these tranquil air-currents be called winds. They seem the very breath of Nature, whispering peace to every living thing. Down in the camp dell there is no swaying of tree-tops; most of the time not a leaf moves. I don’t remember having seen a single lily swinging on its stalk, though they are so tall the least breeze would rock them,” 20.
equally serious issue of how we learn in Nature, if Nature is truly an expression of the wind and God’s breath. As I have argued throughout, truth is cradled in a carefully chosen metaphor, much like it exists in the experience that very metaphor aspires to represent. Spirituality has come to be categorized with emotions, mysticism, transcendence, and romanticism on a shelf with other dusty concepts not deemed fit by modern science. But this is not the correct stack for these human pieces in outdoor science or in the science of holistic education.\(^{176}\) Folk culture and history may make them appear aged by technological standards, but these curiosities and the complexities of humanity remain firmly planted in reality.

We are as much taught by our emotions and softer sides as we are by our facts and figures. Empiricism, for example, is just the expression of behavioral learning from emotional and physical perceptions. We touch a flame, and it burns us, and so we learn not to repeat that error. Our hat is blown off by the wind, and we are frustrated to lose it, so we choose to tie it on next time. God is teaching us through Nature, Wordsworth claims in verse: “To God who thus corrected my desires” (436, 11.374). This would be a predictable ode to Lord and Creator of the British Romantics if these unusual lines did not also follow it immediately:

\[
\text{And afterwards the wind and sleety rain,} \\
\text{And all the business [activity] of the elements,} \\
\text{...The noise of wood and water, and the mist...} \\
(436, 11.375-380)
\]

Wordsworth talks suddenly of the weather in his love ballad addressed to God. He elaborates on how these were the “spectacles and sounds” that he would often return to and “drink as at a fountain.” He is thanking God for correcting the errors of his wants, and explains that the better

\(^{176}\) See Willi Unsoeld’s “Spiritual Values in Wilderness,” Friedrich Schiller’s \textit{The Aesthetic Education of Man}, or John P. Miller et al’s \textit{Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education}.
desires are the ones of Nature, which remind him, maybe, of the aesthetic value of the outdoor environment. For example, he continues by saying that he suspects that later on it is the “storm and rain” upon his roof at night or rainfall during his daytime walks in the woods, that “unknown to me, the workings of my spirit thence are brought” (436, 11.385-387). Wordsworth does not think he will always recognize God’s impact on his life, or what we may posit is Nature’s impact on as well, but he does not doubt that when he senses the weather it will bring his spirit back to life, restore him to the life that he believes to be venerable.

I wonder if we might also consider that Wordsworth’s spirit, or the workings of it, are better understood under weather-rich conditions. I take by “spirit” Wordsworth to mean his true self, the transformed version, and it seems that in revisiting the aesthetic experience of the spectacles and sounds of the torment of a storm, he recollects his own personal learning journey. Either he means God to be sending the rain as a reminder of the work on Wordsworth’s self that has been done, or the weather is God’s guiding hand, come again to correct Wordsworth’s desires.

The Diné (Navajo) people have a related philosophy to Wordsworth’s wind as the breath of God. Although they do not call their deity or deities “God,” they have a word nílch’i that has been translated to Holy Wind, Holy Spirit, or Holy Wind Spirit that incorporates Native spirituality and the physical concepts of wind, air, or atmosphere.\(^\text{177}\) Like the Navajo possess the Holy Winds within and around them as breath, life, thought, and language, Wordsworth keeps God and Nature beside him as he attempts to work out some meaning or richer language for this experience of God as Nature or Nature from God, the mother Nature or father God as teacher, and the son Wordsworth as learner.

\(^{177}\) McNeley, 1.
Spots of Time

Wordsworth does not rest on the laurels of metaphorical when it comes to conceptualizing an indefinable transformative aesthetic learning experience in weather. As I alluded to in my introduction to this writer, Wordsworth coins his own term for these moments. In the passage below, possibly the most puzzling and re-interpreted portion of The Prelude, Wordsworth situates experiences called “spots of time” in aesthetic moments outdoors. Although it is somewhat lengthy, the original location of spots of time should be brought to the forefront en totale so that the central subject of our discussion, the weather-rich environmental context of transformative learning experiences, is directly corroborated. Wordsworth sets the scene at the face of a cliff where he confronts a faceless fear, and from there, a tabula rasa, a Socratic aporia, or a just a sudden loss of words, replaced by the shuddering response of his body:

[A cliff] Upreared its head...
With trembling hands I turned...and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness – call it solitude
Or blank desertion
(50, 1.408-423)

I shook the habit off
Entirely and for ever, and again
In Nature's presence stood, as I stand now,
A sensitive, and a creative soul.
There are in our existence spots of time.
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed…
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired --
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
That penetrates, enables us to mount
When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
Among those passages of life in which
We have had deepest feeling that the mind
Is lord and master, and that outward sense
Is but the obedient servant of her will.
Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
From our first childhood --in our childhood even
Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
As far as memory can look back, is full
Of this beneficent influence. (430, 11.204-228)

If this were one of my classes, I would ask my students now to pause and digest this passage,
then to reread it adding notes as thoughts creep in, to reread it again with one fell swoop of
feeling and emotion, and only then we would begin to discuss. I think this method is equally
relevant to this situation, so I ask you now to take these steps, and read these words through well.
Rather than piece out every important note and nuance, I will then take it upon myself to
elucidate just five details of his account here that are most fitting for this study. I am tempted, but
adding any more details would be to overwhelm this research with literary analysis. Were I to
complete a follow up study for further evidence and clarification, this passage would certainly be
one to re-address.

The Kantian sublime (also reflecting pieces of Longinus and Edmund Burke’s ideas but
most famously dedicated in Kant’s Third Critique) was introduced in the literature review of this
dissertation. Recall that there are roughly three stages to an aesthetic experience of the Kantian
sublime (which take place especially often in Nature, according to most readings of Kant). These
stages are: (1) the experiencer’s mind in some present exposure or relationship to other non-
human objects, a state which I have referred to at times as a “priming” for learning, (2) a moment
or instance of rupture, blankness, loss, confusion, or otherwise conflict posed to our imagination
wherein the experiencer can no longer comprehend or “imagine” the object as it would any other
object, and (3) a resolution is reached when the experiencer realizes that human reason is even
more powerful than this small hiccup of the imagination. Basically, I think of the Kantian
sublime’s final two steps with the handy quip “imagination fails but reason prevails.”

Wordsworth’s spots of time inspire five observations. First, we notice in Wordsworth’s
poem here that there is at least the second Kantian sublime stage in action. Wordsworth mentions
the cliff coming into focus and how it disturbs him because it is unlike other objects; it cannot be
filed away, examined from all angles, or comprehended easily. Like in the dialogue Alcibiades
when the title character’s teacher Socrates stuns him like a stinging blowfish, leaving him numb,
Wordsworth is stuck by a moment of “indetermination,” the “unknown,” shrouded in “dim” light
or “darkness,” left in “solitude,” or in a state of “blank desertion” in his first stanza. I dare to say
that this indicates Wordsworth’s moment of aporia; only it takes place outdoors, which makes it
an acutely disarming aesthetic-sensory experience. Not only does his mind feel lost, his body is
also wept along and suspended in the raging waters of disillusionment. From our anti-dualistic
perspective the occurrence of such a rupture is even more convincing, as we can see distinctly
how the mind and body operate necessarily in union, undivided, even in their complete and
combined confusion.

Second, Wordsworth’s passage here is distinctly Kantian in its third stage. Like Kant,
Wordsworth’s moment of stated blankness – aporia – results in an uplifting conclusion that
man’s reason or mind conquers the pseudo-object of its original conflagration. He says what
results from blank desertion is a feeling that “lifts us up when fallen,” a feeling that, “the mind is
lord and master, and that outward sense [our physicality] is but the obedient servant of her will.”
Ultimately, we dominate the upsetting feeling of ignorance with another feeling that it our

178 See a thorough review of literature on the complicated “fault-lines” of Wordsworth’s spots of
time in Peter Larkin’s aptly titled article, “Wordsworth’s Maculate Exception: Achieving the
‘Spots of Time,’” 1-2.
mental perception alone is what powers our emotions. Like the Stoics, if we only look again, in a new way, a satisfying perspective on the world, which can miraculously assume these impervious pseudo-objects of the sublime. According to Christopher Hitt, it is no surprise that this third stage holds sway still in the time of the British Romantics, and even lingers today.

The basic structural similarity of the accounts of Kant, Wordsworth, and Emerson is important less as a record of literary influence (Wordsworth never read The Critique of Judgment, and Emerson had not yet read The Prelude) than as a sign of a certain consistency in the way “canonical” writers (all of course white, male, Euro-American, and of a particular economic class) – who have had, for better or worse, the strongest impact on hegemonic culture – responded to and represented this universal experience.¹⁷⁹

Hitt’s choice of describing sublime experiences as “universal” is particularly revealing for this dissertation study. The universality of sublime-like transformative learning experiences in weather-rich environments is one of my chief arguments herein. However, we do not always know this transformative aesthetic learning experience in weather-rich environments by the same name, as also evidenced in Chapter II. Wordsworth is an excellent example of this continuing difficulty in grappling with the best-suited aesthetic term for this type of experience, which I argue, is explicitly a type of transformative learning. Wordsworth was likely aware of the well-circulated literature on the sublime from Longinus and Edmund Burke, as well as the colloquial usage of the word sublime then. Interestingly, Wordsworth is known to use “sublimity”

¹⁷⁹ Hitt, 610. Hitt is referring also to Emerson’s passage in Nature: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky… I am glad to the brink of fear… I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of parcel of God…I in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature,” 38-39.
throughout *The Prelude* (e.g., 82, 2.320; 96, 3.103; 148, 4.175), but his descriptions do not match the Kantian sublime as well as his spots of time do.¹⁸⁰

Why should Wordsworth choose to create a new term instead of drawing upon the years of work philosophizing the sublime? I presume this is due to a concern by Wordsworth that the Kantian sublime does not correctly fit the experiences he has had. Wordsworth’s spots of time include, as I will highlight in a minute, sensitivity to the absence of temporality that Kant does not extract. While the experience itself, as indicated by Hitt, is clearly universal in its similarity, it has evolved over time as with any other philosophy of education. I draw attention here to precisely that universality and the general theme, the universality itself being not only the weather, experience, or aesthetics, but of *transformative learning* that other writers have not publicly and explicitly discerned. We may waffle on the terms to use (which is why I avoid putting a name to this experience at all in this research), but the remarkable parallels remain. One only thing I might add is that universality of experience, as in the human ability to have and recognize this experience as something special and worthy of this extensive research does not necessarily suppose that all people do indeed eventually have these moments. A child sequestered in a single room without access to fresh air or wind or rain – say for example, a student stuck in a classroom without windows or recess breaks – may never have the opportunity to share this “universal” human experience, however possible it may have been if other choices (i.e., Thoreau’s choice of the environment outdoors) were made. I mean universality as the strictly Kantian notion, as I assume Hitt also does. Humans can have the feeling that we are all universally human, reasonable, and capable of learning without actually guaranteeing it happens.

¹⁸⁰ There is one exception to this rule at 154, 5.40.
in practice. This missing pledge to the quality of education is as disconcerting, I think, as it is a real and total part of our modern, weather-barred lives.

Third, we can also see from the Spots of Time Passage of The Prelude in contrast to Annie Dillard’s sublime-like experiences and those of Mary Oliver, that there are indeed different theoretical versions at play; the three phases of the Kantian sublime are not necessarily the only or the favored language of this universal experience. Hitt distinguishes, with the help of Keats, an “egotistical sublime” characteristic of Kant and Wordsworth as contrasted with an “ecological sublime” more present in contemporary nature writings.¹⁸¹

The heart of Hitt’s distinction between the conventional egotistical sublime of old and the new-age ecological sublime is how the third phase of sublime aesthetic experiencing is defined. While Kant, Emerson, and Wordsworth may argue that reason ultimately prevails, Dillard, post-modernist philosophers like Jean-François Lyotard or Herbert Marcuse, and eco-feminist thinkers like Val Plumwood find that the sublime results in a slightly less “uplifting” and less anthropocentric conclusion. For Dillard, after she is struck by the numbness of the sublime, “the shadows are deeper. Extravagance takes on a sinister, wastrel air.”¹⁸² For Dillard, this aesthetic experience is not always The Tree With the Lights In It. Simple resolutions are not always found; yet, Dillard is still learning from these moments. One might say instead that the modern versions of this transformative aesthetic learning experience in weather-rich environments are

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¹⁸¹ Hitt, 608. Emily Brady would say that a revision of the Kantian sublime is not necessary, with proper interpretation and application to aesthetic education.

¹⁸² Dillard, 183. As cited in Hitt, 610.
distinguished by their resulting complexity of thought and feeling rather than their simple solution in the human faculty of reason.\textsuperscript{183}

I think this increasing perception of nature writers not for an answer in our inner selves, but a deeper question to be found in the “other” of nature, the weather, symbolizes and should inspire a valuable turn in educational theory. Hitt finds similar significance of this new theorizing that still yields a heightened understanding.\textsuperscript{184} In other words, it is still obvious that Dillard is learning from this experience. Though unlike the egotistical sublime, the ecological sublime suggests a bold turn for the experiencer, the learner, to embrace the discomfort of the second phase of the Kantian sublime. From that discomfort, the learner comes to produce a tolerance for otherness and complexity that leads us to the ultimately fortifying consummation of the experience as having changed us into a more mature and perceptively connected human in our environment.

I suggest a brave type of education is the result of this experience. We ought to see the third phase of this experience as a recovery and subsequent expanse of the imagination. It is not reason that takes us home to learning, although reason is what we use to bring imagination back into our awareness. Imagination is freed by these transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather. I would argue that the third stage of transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather-rich environments is a restoration of imagination, not a revalidation of human reason as omnipotent but the expanse of our ability to be able to imagine more depth, more reason, more unity, more chaos – in the non-human world. It is not simply recognition of our power over

\textsuperscript{183} I do appreciate Hitt’s concern that, historically, Americans have not been keen to embrace the vulnerability of otherness and complexity. This is an issue that certainly warrants another thorough research project.

\textsuperscript{184} Hitt, 611.
nature but a revelation of the inherent independence and value of non-human nature as a force that can and will change us. (We can see this has natural ethical and educational implications for global climate change, a point that I will return to in the final chapter of this dissertation.) Joseph C. Sitterson associates Wordsworth’s spots of time with a metaphorical sort of becoming, and Larkin explains that spots of time prepare the human psyche to be “responsive to a given-ness of the real.” Perhaps, then, spots of time involve becoming aware of reality. In these experiences, we receive the gift of knowledge of the real, which leads our selves to also become more real. Is this a gift from God or Nature? For Wordsworth, God and Nature may be one in the same.

We find in these experiences an expanded rationale for the importance of feeling and living in a state of complexity and unknowing. Consider Thoreau’s famous conclusion in *Ktaadn: The Maine Woods* that the non-human environment is “no man’s garden.” The lingering feeling that haunts us about these experiences, like for Thoreau realizing on Katahdin is the feeling of how unfathomable the weather on this mountain is, leads us to my fourth supposition that these experiences described by all of our writers are, again, models of transformative learning.

My fifth observation from Wordsworth’s spots of time is that they are the first instance of a discussion of temporality – or, more accurately, an evasion of linear time – in our discussion of transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather thus far. According to Wordsworth, although in the moment spots of time have no actual perceptible time-sense, later they become distinctly attached to our understanding of the passage of time. Spots of time, over time, become

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185 As cited in Larkin, 34.

186 As cited and discussed in Hitt, 615. See also Ian Frazier’s 2017 Outside Magazine article, “National Parks Don’t Need Your Misty-Eyed Reverence.”
Wordsworth’s re-imaginings of his most memorable learning experiences, just like Dr. Bigg’s poll.

The days gone by
Come back upon me from the dawn almost
Of life; the hiding-places of my power
Seem open, I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now, when age comes on
May scarcely see at all...

affecting incidents. (432, 11.333-344)

On qualities of Wordsworth’s affecting experience, fleeting yet memorable, fade into just details, perhaps of the lines and shapes or weather, but the reverberating educational implications continue to pulse in his veins.

**Over Glen Pass**

I have had the great privilege to hike solo in Muir Country – the High Sierra Mountains traversed by the 220-mile John Muir Trail. In my seventeen days above treeline, I crossed thirteen high altitude passes, two of which I remember because my passages were made under heavy afternoon hail. When I think of the course of time like Wordsworth and the cloudlands like Muir, crawling up to craggy and foreboding Glen Pass is what first comes to mind. It was an experience ascending into the clouds.

It has now been six years since I crossed Glen Pass, and with the natural turnover of seasons and aging, as with Wordsworth’s spots of time, only bits and pieces of the feelings of this aesthetic experience remain. What has degraded most are my memories of the conversation I had at lunch with the Ranger over tomato soup to hide from the hail briefly, the time of day it was, how long it took me to race the storm, and what I did once on the other end. When I look at this list of missing memories, many of them are indeed about the nonlinearity of time, and some
Others are, interestingly, aspects that we educators emphasize in our classrooms like human interactions, talk, and time. Mine was an affecting incident, certainly, but not in the classic way that taking an exam or completing an activity by a deadline might be. Actually, the more I am thinking of this moment and trying to hold it in my mind, the more I feel the details slipping away, and I find myself cognitively frustrated but mysteriously calm and resplendently nostalgic.

I think of Muir’s words now, as I feel my body climbing up to the narrow pass again with the clouds crowding menacingly around me and the stark wind is so crisp that I can feel it swim into the bottom of my lungs with every inhale: “The night breeze is cool, for all day we have been climbing into the upper sky, the home of the cloud-mountains we so long have admired. How sweet and keen the air!”

**John Muir and Cloudland**

John Muir, a Scottish-born immigrant with Midwestern roots, is frequently cited in environmental studies fields, but rarely quoted in philosophy circles, and even less often spoken.
of by educators. His reputation, I believe, is largely due to the audiences that his writing was originally intended to reach. When Muir began his longest stints into the wilderness, it was after being blinded in a factory accident in 1867 and deciding, consequently, to abandon that work for botany. When he regained his vision and started walking by land from Florida to Cuba, the American South in the aftermath of the Civil War was a jarring sight. Families and Natives were displaced and scattered. Disturbed by the destruction of the landscape and its people, Muir was shaken into activism, although the South was already wrought.

It was not until his first season in the High Sierras as a hired shepherd that he found a place untouched enough to apply his fervent conservationist spirit. After publishing an account of his brief herding days, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Muir returned again and again to the mountains. As the book gained popularity, he further publicized the importance of the scenery of this place. Muir’s focus on place, although it earned the Sierras a reserved land hold from President Roosevelt, was also the crutch of his work. Muir’s waxing religious on the cathedral-like space squarely planted his writing in the category of travelogue. While interesting, his work was considered careful documentation of a beautiful landscape deserving of preservation, but beyond that, hopelessly romantic – not the sort of material for non-naturalistic scientific study, and certainly not the home for a social science like education. Surely there is more to be seen in Muir than what popular culture has labeled as environmentalism. As with our other six nature writers, I look here in this final subsection on literary analysis and philosophy, for data that shows Muir’s lesser-known philosophy of learning from the weather in an environment.

There were two quotes that inspired my early interest in investigating Muir’s writing for this research. The first is that I remembered Muir’s likening of storms as being guides as well as men. In my personal philosophy, I have always likened my work as a wilderness guide to my
work as a teacher. In many ways they are the same vocational pursuit, leading others on great adventures. “Anyhow,” Muir says of his own adventures, “we never know where we must go nor what guides we are to get, – men, storms, guardian angels, or sheep. Perhaps almost everybody in the least natural is guided more than he is ever aware of” (136). Of course, in Muir’s list he does not end with men and storms as teachers (he gives the same powers to angels and sheep), which one could argue is just as good as saying anything teaches. Although this may very well be true for the minor lessons of life, Muir has a particularly high-level learning commitment in mind. He continues, “All the wilderness seems to be full of tricks and plans to drive and draw us up into God’s Light” (136). God’s Light – for a religious man, can there be a greater educational aim than to learn to live in the light of God? Moreover, the wilderness is not only leading us to God, but into his light, a theme we know well from Abbey, Dillard, and others. Muir’s recurring attention to weather phenomena cannot be slighted. Connecting this quote to Muir’s most famous nickname for the High Sierras, still used today, as the “Range of Light,” it is consequently worth exploring his reasons for using weather as a defining feature of his favorite place.  

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187 The High Sierra Mountain Range became known as the “Range of Light” because of this remark in Muir’s book: “Probably more free sunshine falls on this majestic range than on any other in the world I’ve ever seen or heard of. It has the brightest weather, …more star-shine, moon shine, and perhaps more crystal-shine than any other mountain chain, and its countless mirror lakes, having more light poured onto them, glow and spangle most. And how glorious the shining after the short summer showers and after frosty nights when the morning sunbeams are pouring through the crystals on the grass and pine needles, and how ineffably spiritually fine is the morning-glow on the mountain-tops and the alpenglow of evening. Well may the Sierra be named, not the Snowy Range, but the Range of Light,” 129. See also 146. From this we can see that he is referring to light through multiple atmospheric phenomena, not light as a biblical trope.
The Error of “Landscapes”

In the review of the literature on philosophy of education in the outdoors, Chapter II, the thesis that learning outdoors is about place or placefulness was presented. However, as I explained then, this common idea of highlighting place-based, space-centric, and landscape-focused learning perpetuates an unfortunate bias for a person’s own home, which must then somehow be taught to generalize to others’ homes as equally valuable. It also raises an issue for places or landscapes that are not “home” to anyone or anything: Do abandoned locales still have inherent value of place? The idea of place as aesthetic landscape could show some promise for aesthetic learning outdoors, but it also has the limitation of being bound-like to one spot, although no boundaries do actually exist. While we like to think, and I believe often do think unconsciously, of the outdoors as a landscape, this heuristic cultural concept has been inappropriately preferred in outdoor research. As I presented in Chapter II, there is significant need for a label, a term, or more accurately a strong philosophical conception of outdoor space that resists dualisms and artificial boundaries. The weather, which flows unhindered from region to region, knows no country, follows no government, and is owned by no land, no man, is better suited to theorize our relationship to learning about a planetary environment. Although place will always shape our perception of objects, and cultures will always mark their homes by their landscape or cityscape, it is an error to rest on this arbitrary feature to describe the commonality, the universality (again, in the Kantian sense), of our outdoor learning experiences.

Muir is as guilty as we all are of loving places, but he does not succumb absolutely to their fancies. If we look at his words verbatim, as with the other six nature writers, weather permeates his consciousness, even as “landscape” is harkened throughout:
Gazing, awe-stricken, I might have left everything for it [the landscape]. Glad, endless work would then be mine tracing the forces that have brought forth its features, its rocks and plants and animals and glorious weather…for the colors and lines and expression of this divine landscape-countenance are so burned into my mind and heart they surely can never grow dim. (7-8)

He might have left everything for the landscape, but that landscape is what it is because of the “forces that have brought forth its features,” like its “glorious weather,” and its brilliant never-dimming light. Muir makes an even more striking connection between landscape and weather by fashioning descriptions for what he calls at first “landscapes of the sky” (10) before settling in as his most-employed term “cloudlands” (e.g., 96). Of the seven nature writers featured in this research, I can attest that Muir easily wins the prize for the greatest number count of weather words. There is hardly a page without a “cloud” or a “dew drop” on it, and some pages were so riddled with weather talk that I found myself selecting great chunks of passages to quote, with hardly any breathing room for my own thoughts to surface. The excerpts here are highly compressed samples from what is, essentially, his book-length study of weather.

**Daily Weather Reporting as Askesis**

Cloudlands lend themselves to cirrus striations, fluffy cumulous shapes, and in poor spirits, cloudbursts and subsequent flooding (26), and Muir faithfully registers each and every move. His constant references to weather are a hint that he must find something precious in it beyond its mechanical processes and visual appeal. There is significance in his meticulous study. He begins journaling in an almost comically regimented form, where every new entry begins with a daily reporting of the weather at that present time, and he even gives the amount of clouds in the sky a standard decimal percentage, such as “clouds about .05” or “clouds .20” (94, 117). Here are a few examples of his structured weather rating system:
Heard a few peals of thunder from the upper Sierra, and saw firm white bossy cumuli rising back of the pines. This was about noon. (19)

*June* 18. – Another inspiring morning, nothing better in any world can be conceived. No description of Heaven that I have ever heard or read of seems half so fine. At noon the clouds occupied about .05 of the sky, white filmy touches drawn delicately on the azure. (32)

*July* 31. – Another glorious day, the air as delicious to the lungs as nectar to the tongue; indeed the body seems one palate, and tingles equally throughout. Cloudiness about .05, but our ordinary shower has not yet reached us, though I hear thunder in the distance. (95)

The sky-scenery has changed but little so far with the change in elevation. Clouds about .05. Glorious pearly cumuli tinted with purple of ineffable fineness of tone. (113)

Day all sunshine, dawn and evening purple, noon gold, no clouds, air motionless. (114)

What stands out about the sheer number and familiar form of these meteorological reports in his journal are that they are ritualized, disciplined, and devised by Muir into a daily custom. They are ultimately examples of Muir’s *practice* of weather reporting. The reports are not only about the weather but also about maintaining a record of the environmental happenings around him. This practice might be compared to the ancient philosophical spiritual exercises of *askesis* introduced in Chapter III through the idea of the “truthfulness” of weather reporting as a process of meaning making. As explained previously, the practice of journaling and asking philosophical questions about the environment, constantly documenting and using that empirical record to adjust and correct our perspectives on the world, dates back to the traditions of the Stoics.

According to philosopher Michel Foucault, this practice is defined by the recognition of the writer that “human and divine reason share a common function together,” and this realization “is not brought about in the form of the recollection of the soul looking at itself” as it is in Plato’s
philosophy or the Kantian sublime’s egotistical transcendence, “but rather through the movement of the mind’s curiosity exploring the order of the world.” This is a conclusion that rests in an ecological understanding like Hitt’s, rather than a transformation of the self purely for the self’s sake. It is a form of learning that could easily translate to an ethical responsibility toward others through a subsequent understanding of one’s self.

The unique feature of Stoic askesis is that “there is absolutely no passage to another world here.” As mystical and otherworldly as Muir may come across in his references to heaven and shimmering cloudlands, his observational mindset stems from his fervent understanding that he is experiencing the environment to come to know, to learn, the environment. The more he practices these spiritual, philosophical, exercises of noticing and documenting the clouds, the more he senses their own type of innate reason (not the dominion of human reason over chaotic Nature, as it is for Kant in the sublime), the weather’s own Thoreauvian intelligences, the cloudland’s own divine seal. And we see similar askesis in Thoreau’s Walden, and also in Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.

Muir is not over-romanticizing the human at the cost of the other, the non-human; he is practicing how to relate to the otherness of the non-living weather through regular meditation. This is in many ways a pragmatic, constructivist learning philosophy, in that eventually meaning is pieced together and positively applied, with growth as an end in itself. Muir states, “The clouds of noon on the high Sierra seem yet more marvelously, indescribably beautiful from day to day as one becomes more wakeful to see them” (42). Over time Muir further recognizes the value of the cloudlands he watches, explaining how, “these fleeting sky mountains are as

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188 Foucault, 281-282.

189 Ibid., 282.
substantial and significant as the more lasting upheavals of granite beneath them” (emphasis added, 80). Muir’s careful askesis allows him to discover the importance of even the most obscure, distant mysteries of the environment like the clouds and the movement of the weather that can impact the world without living or breathing as we do. He is able to see value in intricate and bold change alike. This is again similar to how Foucault unfolds Seneca’s askesis: “You can see that the great exploration of nature is not used to tear us from the world, but to enable us to grasp ourselves again here where we are.” Foucault continues, settling upon the conclusion that “Knowledge of the self and knowledge of nature are not alternatives, therefore; they are absolutely linked to each other.” Thus, learning about our environment through the documentation of weather is a process of learning about our selves and our “punctual existence,” as Foucault calls it, grounded, as humans are, in the punctuality of time and space, in our environment.

**Simple Allure to Complex Extravagance**

One issue in Muir’s writing remains to be answered. We may learn of our punctual existence through clouds, but how are we transformed by that knowledge? How do we know that there is a degree of transformative perspective shift present, more so than learning that happens indirectly and subtly but not provocatively or memorably through the environment? That is, why should we pay attention to the learning experiences Muir cites? The learning experiences Muir has in his time in cloudland demonstrate the holistic activation of all four dimensions of transformative learning (which we recall are behavioral, psychological, convictional, and

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190 Foucault, 277. He writes this in contrast to Plato’s philosophical Allegory of the Cave, the philosophy of learning that has thoroughly influenced our modern public education system and our traditional conception of transformative learning.
aesthetic). While Muir finds himself in cloudland through a simple allure: “How near they [the mountain peaks] seem and how clear their outlines on the blue air, or rather in the blue air; for they seem to be saturated with it. How consuming strong the invitation they extend!” but he quickly finds the attraction to be compulsive. He realizes that the sky offers him a transformative “conversion” that is so “complete and wholesome” (or holistic), that he finds he cannot imagine life without it (9).

The allure of cloudland is indeed mighty and persistent, and Muir is not the first to have felt it. Surely something strong and meaningful must be occurring in the clouds that thousands of Appalachian Trail through-hikers leave their homes and jobs each year to attempt more time in the mountains, nearest the sky. Many of these hikers I have spoken to believe that the experience is not only enticing because of the beauty of the environment, but because there is something holistically refreshing – perhaps transformative – about their time outdoors. Muir highlights the somaesthetic quality of his experiences in this weather-rich environment:

The whole body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the camp-fire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one’s flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow not explainable. One’s body seems homogeneous throughout, sound as a crystal. (71)

These experiences, he is sure to point out, are not only pleasurable but centered on learning and the pursuit of higher knowledge.

…A glory day of admission into a new realm of wonders as if Nature had wooingly whispered, ‘Come higher.’ What questions I asked, and how little I know of all the vast show, and how eagerly, tremulously hopeful of some day knowing more, learning the meaning of these divine symbols crowded together on this wondrous page. (82, emphasis added)
Muir is seeking not just a pretty landscape to view, but learning and knowledge. He expects the truth to unfold as “divine symbols crowded together.” This idea reappears frequently as Muir expressing the “extravagance” of the weather and of the knowledge he gains from being in it, and the even abundance of truth he has yet to learn (e.g., 33, 52, 63, 68-69, 118).¹⁹¹ He declares the sunrises and sunsets in the Sierras “divine, enduring, unwastable wealth,” whoever rests in cloudland shall, throughout life, “stormy or calm,” be “rich forever” (46-47; 34). For Muir, the richness and wealth of cloudland is about quality, depth, dimensionality, and fruitfulness, not money. He is describing a profound type of learning in weather, not a superficial experience.

Muir’s conviction that these aesthetic experiences in weather are transformative grows increasingly throughout his book. He perceives rich change in himself on September 2. After noting the unusually overloaded colors and atmospheric minutiae of the day, which draws his attention, “A grand, red, rosy, crimson day, – a perfect glory of a day. What it means I don’t know…” (133). No details were spared, and the environment displayed “no trace of economy,” which guides him to ponder the philosophical ramifications, the possible reasons for such an atmospheric excess. He looks back in his mind’s storage of cloud recordings, and finds that the common denominator is utter complexity, and the infinite beauty of learning about the extravagance of our non-artificial environment.

One is constantly reminded of the infinite lavishness and fertility of Nature – inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste. And yet when we look into any of her operations that lie within reach of our minds, we learn that no particle of her material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty; and we soon cease to lament waste and death, and rather rejoice and exult in the imperishable, unsuspendable wealth of the universe, and faithfully watch and wait the reappearance of everything that melts

and fades and dies about us, feeling sure that its next appearance will be better
and more beautiful than the last. (134)

Muir here leaves us with a bittersweet conclusion. The transformative aesthetic learning
experience in cloudland is very much a holistic perspective change of realizing that there is much
more to our universe to discover, and that the otherness of weather is inherently rich and
extravagant. Dillard shares a similar conclusion that “…occasionally the mountains part. The tree
with the lights in it appears, the mockingbird falls, and time unfurls across space like an
oriflamme. Now we rejoice. The news, after all, is not that muskrats are wary, but that they can
be seen” (208). We still gain, grow, learn, and are transformed by ironic or unexpectedly
unsettling lessons. The point is that the ecological experience in weather, this kind of
transformative aesthetic learning experience, yields recognition, sympathy for, and appreciation
of the interminable complexity of the relationship between our human selves in our non-human
environment.
What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions,
but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now.

The philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between
what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he finds himself.

Chapter VII

Now

The research presented in this dissertation investigated, through weather metaphors in nature writing, how outdoor learning can be transformative. Although we have a robust history of books, essays, and poetry about experiences in a weather-rich environment, education as a theoretical and applied field has lacked a philosophical foundation upon which to meaningfully improve and expand outdoor pedagogy. Rather than proposing that the hermeneutical study of weather metaphors leads to prescriptive lessons outdoors, these chapters have begun to uncover the philosophy of transformative learning that already exists in our experiences.

With an increased philosophical understanding of the aesthetically transformative dimensions of outdoor experience, when our senses are most exposed, educators may take the next step of exploring how these experiences impact change-oriented attitudes toward environmental conservation and how to incorporate valuable weather exposure in an otherwise highly standardized school day. This aesthetic-educational research also implies a pioneering and original philosophical argument for the inherent value of the natural environment. I discuss some implications for ethics and classrooms in the subsections of this chapter, my conclusion.

As explained in the second through fourth chapters, it was essential to take an interdisciplinary approach to investigating the aesthetic-educational ramifications of outdoor experience, drawing principally upon the fields of environmental studies, philosophy, and educational theory. Chapters I and II demonstrated that a reasonable literature base exists to support this new research. We have Mezirow’s learning theory to begin to imagine how transformative learning can have multiple dimensions, Dewey, Clark, Joldersma, Shusterman
and others who form a strong foundational argument for embodied aesthetic experience, Lakoff and Johnson, Buell, Rolston, Cavell, Zwicky, and others have crafted successful projects showing that language can be explored as a philosophical method, and international educators like Tagore or Masschelein for models of how outdoor learning in the future might look. None of these scholars, however, has gone in the direction of investigating nature writings both for their apparent philosophies of education and their demonstration of a transformative aesthetic learning experience outdoors. By searching for these philosophies and experiences, I have found that the common thread of aesthetic outdoor experience is humanity’s interaction with a weather-rich environment.

This chapter revisits the whys of this research, explicitly naming five central concerns about our environment today and American public schools that shall impress future pedagogical reform. (A) We have environmental problems facing us – the issues of global climate change and ecological destruction. (B) There is widespread denial of scientific climate research in this country. (C) Generally, American students do not learn atmospheric natural phenomena from experience because they are not significantly exposed to weather in their daily lives. (D) American educators make culturally ingrained choices on learning environments every day. Often we make these choices so deftly that we fail to recognize that there are other options. (E) Holistic learning through all of the dimensions of transformation is not always served by lessons placed in an indoor classroom. For these reasons, primarily, this dissertation has sought to identify and build the foundations for expanded theory on how we learn outdoors, in weather.

Through this study, and from the data presented in Chapters V and VI, I believe we can at least conclude that transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather-rich environments do indeed occur. Although we know these learning experiences by many names, the universal
reality of their existence is a basic starting point for philosophy of education. Other observational notes about these experiences discussed in the aforementioned chapters are that they involve aesthetic feeling, are unbound by yet occur in fractions of time, involve mind/body experiencing, challenge the human desire to categorize and dissect understanding by promoting ontological complexity, can be social, encourage awareness of others, are not always beautiful in a traditional sense, and elude conclusions.

Philosophers of education have established that transformative learning can occur in effective classrooms under the guidance of expert teachers. What is compelling about the research that I have presented in this dissertation, though, is that transformative learning can take place without so many of the seemingly indispensible conditions of an efficacious indoor learning environment. Moreover, some common outdoor conditions even resist components philosophers of education have consistently valued, such as predictability, control, and preset direction.

**There’s a Change in the Weather**

Despite making notable progress conceptualizing outdoor learning, scholars have not yet synthesized their arguments with the environmental literature and outdoor experiences of historically marginalized groups. Most published environmental literature, especially in the nature-writing genre, illustrates a white male experience. Without studying other perspectives, we inadvertently narrow the audience for our research and risk promoting a one-sided theory of environmental education. I am keen to deepen this research into how, for those not raised in or
near “the outdoors,” the modes of environmental education I envision can promote genuinely formative aesthetic-educational experience.

I believe the next step would be to juxtapose my first inquiries with further research into perspectives from indigenous communities regarding ‘organic’ relationships with the natural environment and investigate systematically minoritized and female voices in the environmental literature – or, perhaps more precisely, voices that have yet to be incorporated in this ever-dynamic literature. Additional texts might include the edited poetry selections in Camille Dungy’s *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, *Appalachian Elegy* by bell hooks, *At Home on This Earth* edited by Lorraine Anderson and Thomas Edwards, *Rooted in the Earth* by Dianne Glave, *Dust Tracks on a Road* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Mexican Americans and the Environment: Tierra y Vida* by Devon Peña, or *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* by Val Plumwood.

Producing further research on the metaphorical descriptors of aesthetic learning experience from varied perspectives would allow the expansion of this initial study to a much broader audience and determine whether the same conclusions reached in this dissertation can be validated or rebuked in light of a more diverse data set. For example, how is the experience of a Native American elder in weather similar or different to that of a trained naturalist like John Muir? Do minority writers also recognize the aesthetic presence of weather in transformative learning moments, or do they cite other primary influences? How does culture play a role in our perceptive and sensual interpretations of weather?

From preliminary research, I can say already that there is indeed folk literature to add. In fact, we might say that a “climate change” in the environmental literature is coming. Moreover, these underappreciated nature writers have foretold the literal and metaphorical climate changes
long before they became a matter for national discussion. For instance, in Billy Higgin’s 1921 song, “There’ll Be Some Changes Made” (famously first recorded by Ethel Waters) the chorus recites the lyrics,

Why, there's a change in the weather, there's a change in the sea,  
So from now on there'll be a change in me,  
Why, my walk will be different, and my talk, and my name,  
Nothing about me gonna be the same.\(^{192}\)

African American jazz tells a story of sensitivity to “changes in the weather” as leading to changes in the self, a two-fold indicator of a change in the cultural environment, as in social change or a demand for civil rights, and an empowering change in Black self-identity as a result of these changes in the weather. This is only a hint of the many works by African American writers that utilize weather metaphor for describing transformative experience.

Other examples resembling transformative aesthetic learning experience in weather appear in Native American nature writing. Luther Standing Bear explained the Oglala Lakota’s understanding of weather as teacher, saying,

Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals that shared, alike with us, the storms and blessings of earth. We learned to do what only the student of nature learns, and that was to feel beauty. We never railed at the storms, the furious winds, and the biting frosts and snows.\(^{193}\)

Standing Bear’s people did not fight to control the weather but rather saw it as teeming with lessons for life. Likewise, philosopher Bruce Wilshire retells Black Elk’s vision as a boy of the Six Grandfathers foretelling his life’s role while the clouds and thunder rumbled. Wilshire

\(^{192}\) As cited in Jacques, 13-14.

\(^{193}\) Standing Bear, 194-195.
insists, as I do, that we cannot banish this story as magical folktale. “Take the common practice of many North American indigenous peoples to sing the sun up at dawn… But for us the sun now is only a globe of gas, and, of course, as such, it does not need our efforts to rise in the sky. But this patent truth obscures another older, broader one: that our lives, evolved over millions of years in Nature, have taken shape with the sun, and that if we are to rise with the power of its rising we must celebrate that rising.”\textsuperscript{194} As we can see already from these few short examples, further research that diversifies the data of this dissertation shows promise for yielding fruitful discourse. Much existing philosophy remains to be highlighted and possibly linked to transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather.

\section*{Baked Frogs and School Climate Ethics}

I used to spend my summers on Deer Lake, Minnesota, where my grandparents had built a beautiful house and hosted weeklong parties for family and friends. My family and I would float on inflated tire tubes down the slow and meandering river, swim off of the dock, or sit in under the shaded porch awning with an expansive view of the neighbor’s houses and the activity far out on the lake. One of my favorite pastimes was wriggling my legs through the wrought iron railing bars and dangling them over the porch edge. These painted black metal bars were always hot under the sun, and they often attracted charming little cold-blooded critters for me to observe, like dragonflies or small green climbing tree frogs.

There was one morning that I remember best. It was balmy and humid by dawn and showing all signs of being a scorcher. I had recently acquired a butterfly catching kit with a small

\textsuperscript{194} Wilshire, 17-18.
plastic crate for housing my quarry, and I put it to use for a very delicate tree frog I had found on the railing that morning. I distinctly remember my mom warning me to release my poor little captive before the afternoon sun kicked in, but I was young, irresponsible and easily distracted. At mid-afternoon I remembered the frog had been left out in the blistering sun for hours. What I found was the melted remains of my tenant – still clinging to the little plastic cage door – and I burst into tears of guilt and grief. There was so much power casually exercised in what I had done, what I had chosen to do first through wrongful action, then through neglect. I had trapped something, without its consent, in an artificial, confined place. I wonder if that is how some students feel in their classrooms these days as their eyes wander to the closed windows. We make an analogous choice in our larger environment, too. It is morning and we are closing the door above us, waiting for the afternoon furnace to fire up.

We live in an era where climate change is tangibly evident yet often irresponsibly denied by social practice and policy. Modern American life is disconnected from our natural environment in such a way that it further perpetuates misunderstandings about environmental forces like the weather. This is a cultural and educational problem – but at its core, a philosophical problem. Historian William B. Meyer discovered from his study of Americans and their weather, in a book by the same title, that humans choose whatever value we wish to place on our weather, weather’s current “goodness” or “badness” (regardless of any inherent value it may independently hold). Hence, when it seems that we are having good weather one day, the same exact temperature and conditions ten years from now may be regarded as poor. My point behind this is that all weather descriptors are value choices. Swedes often say that “there is no bad weather, only bad clothes,” and philosophically, I believe they are correct. Humans add our

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195 Meyer, 213.
own value judgments onto environments, making indirect choices everyday of what we like or
dislike. Like beauty and other aesthetics, weather is as much a matter of taste as it is a matter of
scientific fact. And like other aesthetics, any judgment we make has an ethical import. What we
fear or dislike gets evaluated by us as distasteful and horrific, even if those qualities are not in
the subject itself. The connection to education becomes visible here as well. If we teach students
to incorrectly value the environment and its impact, we are attaching ethical implications to our
lessons.\footnote{See Brady, 254-260.} We ought to wish for an education that embraces and learns to correctly interpret the
environment and its weather, with proper perspective like the Stoics practiced toward Nature,
acknowledging what is true and real about the weather as an end in itself, not only what we deem
pleasing or useful about it. Aesthetics are not tools for viewing life but factual descriptors of the
lives that we lead and the objects and movements we perceive around us.

Our current American education system poses significant concerns for the next
generation. Students sit inside walled and climate-controlled classrooms. By curbing natural
elements like the weather and other non-human things, we remove important disturbances that
act and evolve into learning stimuli and other environmental factors that allow students to
transform. As a result, students lose the “feel” of nature, the aesthetic sensibility we can have
toward our environment that characterizes aesthetic experience. Instead, students (and often
teachers) model their lives on the structure of the manufactured world versus the living ebb and
flow of wider, nonhuman creation. Aesthetic experiencing and its companion lyric philosophy
offer theory and method to dissolve this fabricated line between inside and outside, indoors and
The semantics relate directly to the actions we take and our treatment of the non-artificial environment.

In other words, this dissertation’s picture of outdoor learning as aesthetic transformation in weather can be contrasted with mechanical, rigid, or strict intellectualist forms of teaching. After reviewing this picture, perhaps general classroom educators might reconceive how we holistically teach children, reach more students with transformative experience, better understand some students’ desire for alternative learning, fight unnecessary philosophical dualisms like mind/body or human/nature in the classroom, present a language for reconnecting students to the outdoors, and ultimately, open up new possibilities for learning activities and spaces. This is the discussion to come in the next subsection.

On ethical matters, environmental philosophers have published endless versions of arguments, many to great practical success in policy, but so much work remains to do. I appreciate the list that the book *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril* gives us of all of the reasons that we might advocate of an ethics of climate care, beginning with the sentence starter, “We have a moral obligation to act…” and filled in with the following list. Although not comprehensive, I think it provides us with a starting point and a sense of what has already been argued in the literature.

We have a moral obligation to act…

...for the survival of mankind.

...for the sake of the children.

...for the sake of the Earth itself.

...for the sake of all life-forms on the planet.

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197 See Quay and Seaman for a detailed discussion of the problems of the indoor/outdoor dualism.
...to honor our duties of gratitude and reciprocity.

...for the full expression of human virtue.

...because flourishing is mutual.

...for the stewardship of God’s creation.

...because compassion requires it.

...because justice demands it.

...because the world is beautiful.

...because we love the world.

...to honor and celebrate Earth’s systems.

...because moral integrity requires it.198

A reader of this dissertation research will recognize that I have borrowed from several common environmental ethics arguments, but that I arrange them in a matter that offers something novel to the conversation. My primary position is twofold. We have a moral obligation to act in response to climate change because weather has inherent value or intelligence, and we can and are transformed as learners by it and thus should protect it for the sake of our human pursuit of truth/knowledge/wisdom.

I argue that we make a critical error when we discourage discussions of elemental forces like the weather, for example, by assuming that weather is a banal topic. Really, weather has been of crucial value to mankind and non-human nature since its creation. Without weather in our environment, change is stagnated, and death is inevitable. However, weather change in the magnitude that we are seeing it in the world today is as disconcerting as the image of a weather-less planet. We live in a delicate equilibrium with our environment, and by taking its value for

198 Moore and Nelson, vii-xii.
granted, and failing to mold culture in the direction of embracing weather exposure, we fail to keep it at the forefront where it belongs. Climate change or global warming is only threatening if we claim it exists. Unfortunately, only a portion of the American population has reached this conclusion that a generation of researchers have predicted.\footnote{According to a Pew research survey published in The Guardian October 6, 2016, only 48\% of Americans believe in human-caused climate change.} If we do not care for our environment, we lose it. If we lose our environment and have nowhere to exist, we cease to exist. We die. The consequences themselves are as plain as they are plainly undesirable.

If the argument that weather is valuable in and of itself is remains unconvincing, there is another particular stance that may be deduced from this research. The seven nature writers profiled here agree on one point clearly. Weather teaches. It transforms. If we destroy weather, if we alter the climate beyond recognition or recovery, we rob \textit{ourselves} of its educative potential. Although this anthropocentric angle is not my preferred position, its straightforward logic ought to be convincing to readers that more readily comply with the United States’ capitalistic principles.

Consider the issue this way: If we prove that transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather-rich environments exist, as this dissertation research posits, then weather is required for some types of transformative learning experiences. If we remove our bodies and minds from exposure to the weather, then we subsequently remove our opportunity to learn from it in this way. If we damage the weather irrevocably, then we forever change the dynamic learning outcomes we may experience, possibly permanently altering our relationship with the weather, a relationship that we now know informs learning.
With the recent headlines of injustice in New Orleans after certain parts of Black neighborhoods were impacted by Hurricane Katrina’s flooding more than others, the multitude of school shootings where students are not able to escape their classrooms, and my personal experience working with students in the Bronx who tell me that their classrooms are stiflingly hot in the fall, because their schools are strapped for funding properly ventilated school buildings, weather issues are social issues that cannot be ignored. There was an article in the *New York Times* on December 9, 2015, following health threat levels of high pollution that kept Beijing schoolchildren at home and indoors for several days, one parent worried that the environmental damage could give his son a “very negative view of nature.” This news story indicates that we have to also worry about how we may be indirectly teaching students to fear outdoor environments.

In a different ethical appeal to human responsibility and duty, we might consider the non-artificial environment to have independent status. Nature writers who have spent a majority of their lives studying the Earth understand it to hold inherent value. That value is intelligent value; most specifically here, weather is intelligent. Not necessarily in its particular design or one object’s grasp of truth, but in parts that each belong to the bigger picture of a better understanding and maintenance of our necessary environment. These parts include the elemental features of weather. To destroy the weather is to destroy a type of knowledge embedded in those elemental forces.
Class Beyond Classrooms

Edward Abbey was notorious the Monkey Wrench Gang, 1960s extremists who took environmentalism to the edge and infringed on human rights in order to protect the place, the space, or aesthetic experience they personally desired. This research does not advocate these measures. Instead, there is respectful ethical action we can take to mitigate climate change impact and further damage to the weather that we should recognize as both valuable in itself and valuable for humans as learners. The two-fold solution lies, first, in public education’s enduring power to choose its environment, and second, in teachers’ ability to guide student experiencing. I call this first point the liberty to create “class beyond classrooms,” although it is far from being a new invention, nor my singular recommendation for practicing a philosophy of learning in weather. Schools and educators can choose to create class beyond the traditional classroom structure and beyond buildings, in weather-rich environments.

This research has suggested that being in weather-rich environments has the potential to prime or lead to transformative aesthetic learning experiences. But how do we teach for transformative aesthetic learning experiences in weather-rich environments? One can see there is much work yet to do conceiving what it can mean to “take a classroom outdoors.” What classes are able to do this? Is the embodied experience compromised by the very attempt to “create” it as educators? What are the ecological effects of seeing the environment anew as an implicit place of learning? These are some questions among many that future research must address.

I have come to a few thoughts, however, on how we might begin to encourage more of these special learning experiences. It seems that the right place to start would be the same method I have taken in this research: Draw philosophical theory, evidence of, and awareness for these experiences into the public light. It is hard to teach what we cannot or do not first
conceptualize. I take this research to be launching this project for the field of philosophy of education. The other method I have following in this study is the hermeneutical tracing of metaphorical weather talk. I believe that for the same reasons that de Beistegui, Zwicky, many others, and I see truthfulness and seriousness in weather talk, we might also mobilize our use of poetic language to bring students into greater communication with their aesthetic experiences in weather. This would also involve a necessary re-evaluation of how we speak about the weather around students. Lastly, for the same reason that a teacher can lead a horse to water but cannot force it to drink, we might consider our role as educators to be that of a wilderness guide.

This research only scratches the surface of the theory educators really need, but without a solid idea of what the outdoors offers us pedagogically, even educators who already believe in the learning potential of outdoor experiences run the risk of theorizing concepts and justifying “outdoor activities” that bear no resemblance to the holistically transformative learning we hope to inspire. It is my sincere hope that this research actively works to offer budding theory for pedagogical practice. The aesthetic experience discussed here does not oppose current outdoor, experiential, or adventure education work, but it should deepen outdoor educators’ philosophical rationale. It can help them to resist the demand to pre-package their work with students, or to over-emphasize curriculum over the holistic, mind/body development of the learner, especially since I argue that it is not the planned activity itself so much as the active, aesthetic experiencing, contextualized in our choice of environment and reactions to that environment, that leads to transformative learning.
Urban Eclipse

On February 15, 2018, the day of the partial solar eclipse, I witnessed New Yorkers across the city emerging from their offices in the middle of busy workdays, donning special sunglasses, and waiting for the big moment to arrive. From my apartment building I could see the light dimming as the clouds moved in, creating fantastic aural light beams and blackening the surrounding buildings. The temperature dropped drastically, and the streets fell miraculously quiet. Down in Midtown at the same time, a similar picture unfolded, and thousands gathering stopped traffic to catch a better look. The impact that this atmospheric event had on millions of urbanites was unbelievable, and I see it as a hopeful sign for humanity eventually coming to terms with the weather’s impact on our lives. What better way to begin this ethical and cultural process of environmental response than to initiate a deeper discussion of the value of weather for transformative learning?

My final note is a call to teachers. We might try first to simply let the light in, pull back the shades. Open a window. Then open a door.
Bibliography


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