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## General Prompts for Reading Response

Though I mean to issue prompts for each session's readings, there are general avenues of response you can take for anything we read—ways not only to analyze and talk back to individual essays but to discern trends and patterns in readings across the course. The questions below suggest such avenues. Once the course starts we'll be very busy, with two sessions per day and writing due for each: it will help to get started on reading and responding before classes start. These questions can get you started now. You can use them to help guide how you read, what you notice and make notes on. You can plot out ways of responding or even draft responses to revisit and refine later on. Here goes:

- Where's the interest? Where does interest reside in the text—for you personally, for the writer, for the culture, nation, collective psyche, or species at large? Bear in mind that *interest* has a double sense, referring both to what engages and entertains *and* what conduces to advantage or gain. What you're interested in may or may not conduce to your interest. Thus this simple question may trigger a direct, personal response, a feeling of recognition or allegiance or consternation, an association with other elements of one's experience; or it may occasion reflection on power relations, ideological formations and such—especially ways social arrangements may be reflected in or projected upon aspects of natural history, by design or unwittingly, in affirmation or critique.
- What's the story? Of the three “dimensions” or “aspects” of nature writing that Thomas Lyon discusses in his taxonomy—natural history information, personal response, and philosophical interpretation—the first and third don't necessarily lend themselves to narrative treatment. Yet they *may* do this: information may be conveyed as narrative (some particular event that happened or some habitual process that happens, a sort of master plot), and interpretation may take shape as fable, parable, historical analogy or the like. As for personal response: there's nearly always some story (or cluster of stories) involved, whether overt (as with a ramble, the story of a walk) or implicit (as a moment of response can itself figure as an event occurring in time). So you can ask what story or stories inform a text, how they unfold, what events comprise them and what conclusions or morals arise from them, how they speak to each other and figure in the text's larger shape or form, its weaving of narrative, descriptive, and expository elements, etc. After a while, you can proceed to ask whether the same sorts of stories, the same scenarios and plots, crop up in different works of nature writing.
- What passes for characters? Stories have characters, but accounts of nature may be short of these, since frequently they involve the writer alone, venturing through and observing a realm of nature that implicitly excludes other humans or renders them irrelevant, beside the point. So the question of characters is at least twofold. First, how does the writer him/herself come across as a character, whether through self-dramatization (as the protagonist of self-told stories) or implicitly, through tone and attitude? Second, how are nonhuman entities (animals, plants, weather, landforms and such) *characterized*: figured as characters, given agency and purpose, deployed as allies, enemies, or counterparts in some drama? With what effect, to what end?

- How is ecology enacted and troped? If the truth of ecology (so to speak) predates the invention of that term (by Ernst Haeckel, in 1866), then it's been conveyed in works on nature ever since close attention to natural phenomena has been fostered. What is that truth? John Muir, whom we'll read, gave a succinct summation: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." In natural history, this endless hitching-together is enacted through observation and description, of course. Yet terms of description may not only account for ecological relations but also have something "ecological" about them in themselves—through what the late critic Richard Poirier (a scholar of Emerson and Thoreau, among others) called "the salutary activity of troping." Troping is the use and extension of figures of speech, as with Muir's trope of *hitching*—the joining of such objects as wagons or train cars or (colloquially) people in marriage—for the operations of the universe. (*Operations* can be thought of as itself a trope, and so on, throughout the weave—that's a trope!—of language.) So this question exhorts you to look out for key tropes by which the connectedness of the natural creation is expressed through the connectedness, the adhesive analogizing powers, of language itself. (We'll see this in Thoreau's chapter "Spring" as elsewhere.)

It won't escape your notice how these questions bleed into each other. That's fine. Start anywhere you like, with any observation or inkling of response, and see where that takes you....