

WITH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SANDRA
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IN APRIL 2009, MY COLLEAGUES AND I CELEBRATED THE approval of “Environmental Literature” as a new English course at the University of North Carolina-Pembroke. As with most things in academe, this course traveled a long way from inception to approbation. It began as a small pilot with twelve students, team-taught in fall 2008 with American Indian Studies Professor Jane Haladay. After this encouraging trial run, it ran the gauntlet of bureaucratic decision-making, and I had to work hard to assure my department and university colleagues that “environmental literature” was indeed a field and to sort out the confusion as to how a course that straddles humanities and sciences should be classified in our General Education program. When the university’s Faculty Senate gave its unanimous vote of approval, those of us passionate about sustainability and the environment congratulated ourselves and looked forward to seeing the class on the books.

I was still excited about a year later as I planned the first offering of the course during “Maymester” 2010. To fit the compressed time frame of the short summer term – two and a half weeks, meeting

great BUZZARDS and talking HOGS,

GHOST CRABS and GOOPHERED GRAPEVINES, SHARECROPPING and RIVERWRITING:

SPECIES OF NORTH CAROLINA ENVIRONMENTAL LITERATURE



PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDRA CARAWAN

by
Scott Hicks

notes contributed
by *NCLR* staff

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COURTESY OF SCOTT HICKS



three and a half hours a day – I decided to limit our study to works about North Carolina. My objectives were simple: to introduce students to the biological, cultural, and geographical diversity of North Carolina (its *terroir*, so to speak); to engage students in synthesizing the ecological challenges we face and the way we imagine them in literature; and to energize students to take action in the places they call home. While the objectives might have been simple, winnowing down innumerable possible texts into the handful we could reasonably study in Maymester was nearly impossible. After queries to the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment listserv and the North Carolina Writers Network and with much agony as text after text fell to the cutting room floor, I prepared the best reading list I could: a novel, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, in which the characters travel through North Carolina; poetry by James Applewhite and Allison Adelle Hedge Coke; short stories by Charles W. Chesnutt and Randall Kenan; drama, Thomas Wolfe's *The Mountains*; a memoir, Tim McLaurin's *Keeper of the Moon*; myth – Cherokee

in particular; personal narratives and science writing by Rachel Carson, Jan DeBlieu, and Moses Roper; and travelogues by John Lawson and V.S. Naipaul. These texts, I thought, would reconnect a culturally diverse group of students to the richness of the landscapes they already knew and provoke important conversations about how we relate to our surroundings, our ecosystems, and each other – conversations that would underscore our responsibility to doing right by the environment and the people with whom we share our world.¹

Such heady idealism propelled me through the grind of spring semester final grading and had me excited about the summer term. The idealism came to a screeching halt the first day of Maymester, when I drove to campus to find the grassy quad in front of my office laid waste: screaming chainsaws were dismembering the forty or so cherry trees that lined the plaza while a Bobcat outfitted with a forklift ripped the roots from the ground. Another Bobcat lifted the carcasses into a dump truck, with the accidentally ironic name of the company emblazoned on the side: "Curb Appeal." The English Department secretary said she heard that the university was putting in sidewalks. For all my previous excitement, I couldn't help but think the changes to the plaza were an omen – with Joni Mitchell's "Big Yellow Taxi" as its soundtrack. The developing wasteland, however, fortified my resolve to introduce my students to North Carolina environmental literature. Despite my foreboding, it was time to get started.

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LEFT Students of Scott Hicks's "Environmental Literatures of North Carolina" class on the Eno River, NC, 2010; front, Bryce Ledford and Hui Liu; back, left to right, Alexandra Lang, Sanne Pernov, Marquita Thompson, Megan Ellis, Beverly Vause, Elizabeth Vause, Yongchen Lei, Tiffany Tyner Schwab, and Hillary Morgan

¹ This essay describes and analyzes the literature we studied and includes the observations, responses, and perspectives of students who took the course. Students' voices are quoted from the web pages they created to fulfill the major assignment of the course, which are linked to the class's website at www.uncp.edu/home/hickss/ncl/; these will be cited in notes by student name and paper title.