19 The elephant in the room

Acknowledging global climate change in courses not focused on climate

Scott Slovic

> Man cannot afford to be a naturalist, to look at Nature directly, but only with the side of his eye. He must look through and beyond her. To look at her is as fatal as to look at the head of Medusa. It turns the man of science to stone.
>
> (Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, 1841, p. 45)

> Not until we are completely lost, or turned round,—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost,—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature. Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction.
>
> (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854, p. 171)

The Earth's climate is changing. We hear this message loud and clear from the vast chorus of scientists around the world. Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989) sounded the clarion cry long before this issue was on the radar of the general public, even before many environmental scholars (at least in the humanities) were attuned to this most fundamental of concerns. And then the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) began issuing its periodic assessment reports in 1990, affirming the reality and significance of anthropogenic climate change and unleashing a firestorm of controversy ... and attracting an ever-broader constituency.

Why should a physical, environmental phenomenon such as climate change require "a constituency," a community of believers or supporters? The phenomenon is happening, whether human beings support it or not, and whether or not people even believe it exists. Many would argue that climate change represents perhaps the gravest threat to the future of our species on this planet and that, as Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael Nelson assert in the 2011 volume *Moral Ground*, it is simply our ethical responsibility, having belonged to generations contributing heavily to climate change, to do what we can to mitigate biospheric changes and leave an inhabitable planet for future generations. Thus we have organizations such as 350.org coordinating lectures and holding rallies, mobilizing the American public to think about individual lifestyle changes and broader policy reform in the interest of reducing the atmosphere's carbon dioxide levels from approximately 400 parts per million (ppm) to at most 350 ppm, which could pull us back from the current tipping point.

But all of this is dauntingly grim and numbingly abstract, not really the kind of topic likely to draw average university students into the classroom at a time when academic administrators are counting empty seats.

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Climate change is as much a psychological phenomenon as it is a geophysical one. Or, at least, for teachers and scholars in the humanities, it is important to recognize that our ability to engage with this topic may be chiefly on the level of perception and representation (or communication). In his 2014 work, *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, activist and author George Marshall outlines in forty-two brief chapters an array of psychological reasons for the inability of the human mind to apprehend not only the gravity but the mere reality of climate change. Marshall's explanations range from the tendency to use uncertainty as rationale for inaction to the complicated emotional reactions people have to the topic of death (and even extinction of the species), something we tend to push to the margins of consciousness as scary and unimaginable.

In *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Emotion, and Meaning in a World of Data* (2015), my father (psychologist Paul Slovic) and I discuss, in a somewhat more circumscribed and focused way than Marshall, a set of core psychological conditions and tendencies that complicate human sensitivity to a host of social and environmental concerns, ranging from genocide to climate change. In particular, we focus on psychic numbing, pseudoinefficacy, the prominence effect, and the asymmetry of trust.

At the core of the *Numbers and Nerves* project is what we call "the psychophysics of brightness": the simple fact that the human mind is tragically insensitive to large-scale phenomena. The change from one to two is more salient to us than the difference between thirty and thirty-one. By the time we're talking about 350 or 400 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the numbers wash right past us, causing virtually no affective response. Social scientists have identified and attached names to these various mental processes, but writers and artists have also intuited such cognitive limitations and have invented communication strategies (usually involving multidimensional combinations of abstract, quantitative overviews and salient, individualized narratives or "trans-scalar" movements between individual and collective representations of information) designed to strike home with audiences. This is where, for me, the prospect of effective teaching of climate change literature comes into play.

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I began this chapter with two epigraphs from Henry David Thoreau, the patron saint of American nature writing but perhaps an unlikely voice to present at the beginning of a discussion of climate change pedegogy in the twenty-first century. These two passages, though, represent psychological insights that have resonated with me for the past thirty years and serve as foundations, at least on an unconscious level, for my teaching of environmental literature and ecocriticism. The first passage, lifted from Thoreau's 1841 journal, suggests to me the importance of indirection. When we stare at nature directly, the writer states, we turn to stone—we become insensitive to its subtleties. For various reasons (including those I

mentioned above in my discussion of psychology and climate change), something similar happens if we teach topics like climate change "directly," especially in a literature class. I prefer to sidle up to this topic gradually or to talk about it without quite talking about it—and to allow students to raise the issue themselves without feeling as if I have trapped them in their seats and will now force them to confront this fearful and overwhelming subject.

The second epigraph comes from the chapter in *Walden* called "The Village," in which Thoreau writes about how easily we can become disoriented in the world. For him, disorientation was, I would argue, a very good thing, a way of waking up to reality. I try in much of my teaching to foster small and large moments of disorientation and realization, and I prefer to have these moments simply happen, when the students are ready. Sometimes this occurs for an entire class at one moment, such as the occasion last year when a pack of wolves began howling just outside of our camp in the central Idaho mountains at precisely the moment when we were discussing the idea of iconoclastic activists howling their literary voices toward the powers that be. More often, individual students achieve small awakenings when specific books—or even singular passages—strike a poignant chord with them. When students linger after class to say, "I just realized something about my life"; or when they come shyly to office hours for the first time to say, "I needed to talk with you about this line in today's readings"—at these moments, I understand that something akin to Thoreau's "man ... turned round once with his eyes shut in this world" has occurred. These are the moments I live for as a teacher.

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I have been teaching environmental writing and environmental literature for more than thirty years, dating back to my days as a graduate student. Nearly always, in contexts ranging from freshman writing to graduate seminars, I've had my own goals for the classes that I have not explicitly shared with my students, hoping that seemingly marginal topics would emerge as core foci or that delayed approaches to particular authors or works would enable these encounters to resonate more deeply because of the month or two of preparation we've experienced. I do not call my classes "Literature and 'Elephants'." I wait for the moment when one of my students will say, "Has anyone noticed there's an elephant sitting in the corner? Let's talk about that." My approach to controversial and difficult topics as a teacher tends to be far less direct than my approach as a scholar and editor.

I would like to mention three specific courses in which the climate "elephant" has been subtly present but not foregrounded:

In 2006, I taught a graduate seminar at the University of Nevada, Reno, called "The Literature of Energy." The course description did not mention climate change, but this idea was a subcurrent throughout the syllabus. The explicit goal of the seminar—and the textbook, *Currents of the Universal Being: Explorations in the Literature of Energy* (2015), that emerged from the class—was to broaden the scope of the energy conversation and take this ubiquitous and fundamental topic beyond the headline debates of the popular media, beyond questions of fossil fuels and alternative/renewable sources of energy. Of the eight books we studied together, only three—McKibben's *The End of Nature*, Ross Gelbspan's *Boiling Point: How*

Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists, and Activists have Fueled the Climate Crisis—and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster, and Susan Gaines's *Carbon Dreams*—explicitly engage with climate change. And these appeared in weeks six (McKibben), seven (Gelbspan), and ten (Gaines) of the fifteen-week semester. Climate change was the elephant in the seminar room, but the purpose of the class was essentially to situate the topic of climate change in much broader personal, social, and environmental contexts. As energy scholar Vaclav Smil writes in *Energy at the Crossroads*, "Tug at any human use of energy and you will find its effects cascading throughout society, spilling into the environment and coming back to us" (Smil 373). In other words, tug on the topic of energy, and you may find it connected to an elephant's trunk—the elephant of climate change.

The detailed syllabus for this class was published in *Currents of the Universal Being*, along with other sample syllabi prepared by my co-editors, Jim Bishop and Kyhl Lyndgaard, who were doctoral students in the 2006 seminar and are now professors. In addition to the explicitly climate-focused readings mentioned above, we read and discussed diverse publications such as Kenneth Brower's *The Starship and the Canoe* (1978) and Alan Weisman's *Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the World* (1998), which explore alternative ideas about energy use without directly mentioning the connection with climate change. The essential challenge of this course, though, was to offer a coherent curriculum in a field (energy literature) that, as some might have argued at the time, did not even exist. Our class sought to cover a topic and *define* that topic at the same time. In order to bring my students on board as active learners, I enlisted them to help create the field of energy literature. Students developed individual and group projects that helped to clarify the nature and scope of energy literature: interviews with someone knowledgeable in the field of energy, reviews of recent books relevant to energy, final Powerpoint presentations on energy literature, a group bibliography of energy-related texts, and the collaboratively written proposal for our book project (i.e., for the anthology of energy literature that was quickly granted an advance contract and eventually published in 2015).

Between 2008 and 2012, I offered four different versions of a course on the literature of sustainability at Nevada, team-teaching with atmospheric chemist and University of Nevada (UNR) environmental affairs manager John Sagebiel. A longtime specialist in air pollution and climate science at Reno's Desert Research Institute, John obviously had deep knowledge of global climate change. We made the most of this knowledge, weaving climate texts and tasks throughout our classes, but we made a conscious decision not to bludgeon our students with this topic, which we expected to be overwhelming to some students and contentious for others. The fundamental objectives of the two major versions of the course—one a broad survey of sustainability topics (food, water, transporation, architecture, and ecosystem health) and the other a more focused treatment of sustainable food practices and American culture—were to help undergraduates appreciate the relevance of literature and the relevance of broad environmental discussions to their individual lives and to invite non-humanities majors (most students were not English majors) into the study of literature by showing how profoundly these texts could explore the human meaning of environmental issues. For the broader course on sustainability literature, our texts included, among others, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (food), Ellen Meloy's *Raven's Exile* (water), Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (transportation), Sarah Susanka's *The Not So Big House* (architecture), and Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream* (ecosystem contamination and public health). The only book that explicitly addressed climate change was Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, but we asked our students to write (and talk about) the book's rhetorical strategies, not only its content and argument, and in focusing students' attention on *form*, we managed to ease the challenging content into the classroom rather than pushing students directly into a discussion of the monstrous climate elephant that had been in the background of other discussions throughout the term.

Since 2013, I have been teaching environmental writing as one of five courses offered to a group of approximately a dozen undergraduates who participate each fall in the University of Idaho's Semester in the Wild Program, which takes place at the Taylor Wilderness Research Station in the central Idaho wilderness (the Frank Church—River of No Return Wilderness is part of the largest roadless area in the lower forty-eight states). Students hike to the research station early in the fall semester and remain for two and a half months, studying river ecology and wilderness area management, cooking for themselves, and spending free time flyfishing and mountain climbing. Much of my writing class focuses on the nuts and bolts of writing personal essays about environmental experience and philosophical essays about wildlife and wild places. But toward the end of the class, we turn our attention to using our literary voices in crafting "personal testimonies" that can be used as letters to the editor or statements to be presented at public hearings. Two of our readings late in the semester from the anthology *Literature and the Environment*, Derrick Jensen's essay "Forget Shorter Showers" and Michael Pollan's "Why Bother?," function implicitly as a debate about the importance of militating for systemic changes in public policy versus the value of small-scale changes of individual lifestyles in response to such problems as climate change. By the time we get to the Jensen and Pollan readings, about ten weeks into the term, the students have been primed to engage in the intense and irresolvable self-reflection required by these essays on such provocative topics.

Timing is everything in course design, especially when the unspoken goal is to allow students to wake up to the presence of the elephant in the room—or the elephant in the Idaho wilderness. Although Semester in the Wild students tend to fret about the fact that their off-the-grid lives require weekly food deliveries on small bush planes, bringing essential supplies from distant farms, they tend not to say much about this until we get to the Jensen and Pollan articles. I find that some of our best class discussions—and the best student writing—occur at this point, when their prose skills have been sharpened and they're ready to address intractable questions of personal values and lifestyle inconsistencies. After the students have wrestled for a few hours with Jensen and Pollan, I ask them to read Donella Meadows's "Living Lightly and Inconsistently on the Land," also from our anthology, as a way of letting them off the hook for their own eco-hypocrisy (of which all of us are guilty to some degree) and also showing how we can be mindful of our environmental impact and struggle meaningfully with the inconsistency

between our values and our behavior. One Semester in the Wild student was so moved by the ethical questions arising from the readings mentioned above and by the unique paradox of living an off-the-grid life in the wilderness and relying upon bush planes to deliver food each week that she wrote an essay addressed specifically to college undergraduates for the Winter 2014 global warming issue of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

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Over many years of teaching, I have found that when I want students to think about potentially abrasive or abstract topics I'm better off—that is, more likely to spark student engagement and lively conversation—when I approach these subjects as Thoreau recommended approaching nature itself: in a sideways manner. For instance, even by asking students to focus on the literary form of Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* rather than the subject matter—until the students themselves, after talking about visual imagery and numerical data and family stories, suddenly bring up the fact that the book is about climate change. "Oh, yeah," I say. "What do you think about that?" By approaching climate change gradually and indirectly through the lens of sustainability and energy (and, in a sense, the secondary lenses of food, water, transportation, and architecture), the topic becomes somewhat disentangled from the all-too-familiar entrenched positions of talking heads in the media. Climate change comes to be recognizable, as an extension of our daily lives.

What's more, by bringing the subject of climate change down to earth, so to speak, the smaller aspects of this huge topic start to seem approachable, even correctable. Much of Mitchell Thomashow's powerful 2003 study *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* addresses (without ever using this phrase) what ecocritics have come to call "slow violence," thanks to Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, meaning the vast, slow, systemic problems, from poverty to extinction to global warming, that we can hardly apprehend. But Thomashow's purpose, in offering various cognitive and sensory suggestions that enable perception of global change on the individual human scale, is to deliver a sense of modest hopefulness to readers. Early in the book, he says, "you don't have to be optimistic to be hopeful" (Thomashow 18). This, too, is the linchpin of my own approach to the indirect teaching of climate change literature. Yes, in the long run, things don't look too good. But that doesn't mean we—and our students—can't live idealistic, engaged, and, indeed, *hopeful* lives, taking on problems like climate change one small idea at a time.

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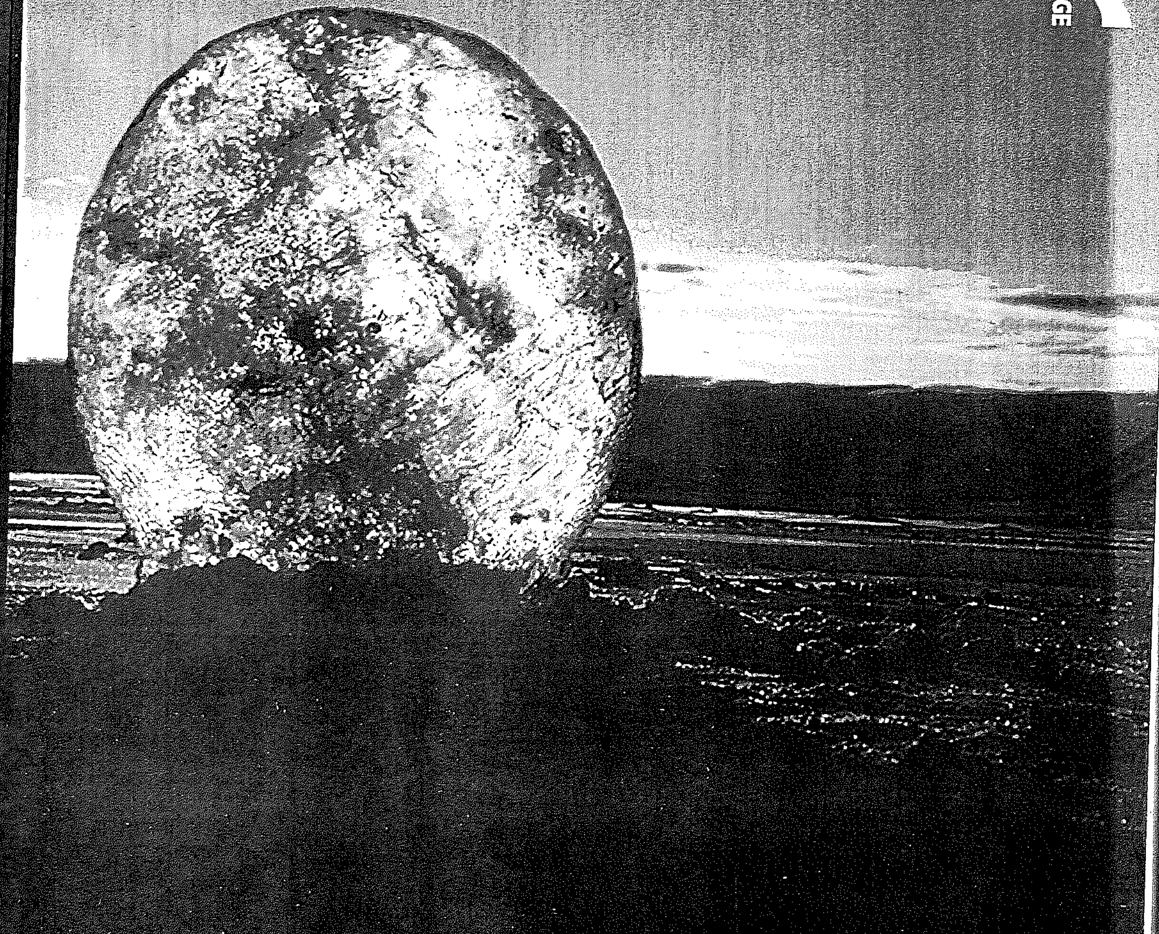

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