Living in a Transformed Desert

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It is a simple equation: place + people = politics.

Terry Tempest Williams

I noticed in my peripheral vision from the passenger seat where I was sitting a yellow pillowcase wriggling on the backseat of the VW van. Flo, an environmental biologist, and I were carpooling to Cypress College where we worked. Flo and I were both veteran teachers of more than ten years, I in the English department and she in biology.

“What’s that in the pillowcase?” I asked her warily.

“Oh, that’s a little snake I picked up in the Mojave Desert last week to show to my class. I have to return it this afternoon.”

“Return it? Where?”

“Don’t worry. She’s really quite harmless, just a little disoriented. I need to take her back this afternoon after my classes to the spot where I found her in the desert.”

“Why?”

Patiently, Flo explained that, in order for her students to develop a sense of respect for the creatures that live in nature, it was necessary for them to see the animals as living beings, not just as pictures in books and films or specimens in jars. Therefore, she had been taking these trips into the Mojave Desert twice a year to pick up whatever creatures she could capture, show them to her students, and then return them in a few days. It would seem an intrusion on natural processes, but it was the only way most of her students could see these creatures close up, short of physically taking her whole class out into the desert.
But, I asked, wouldn’t it be more sensible to keep the snake alive in a terrarium in her classroom so that she didn’t have to do this twice a year or at least let it go in the hills near where we lived? What difference would it make to the animal, I wondered aloud.

“A big difference,” she said, “because the animals live in close symbiotic relationship with other animals and plants that are particular to the area.” Her explanation became somewhat technical, and my mind began to wander.

It had been eighteen years since I had driven through the Mojave Desert when my husband and I moved our family westward from New York to California for his new job. I remembered the numbing hours and hours of traveling through the vast uninhabited desert areas while trying to keep our restless children in the backseat occupied, and I was concerned about Flo driving into such a desolate area by herself. Impulsively, I offered to go along to keep her company. I made hasty telephone calls to my husband at work and my mother who would be caring for our children. After our morning classes, Flo and I, with her “little snake” in tow, were on the freeway for our four-hour drive towards the Providence Mountains in the Mojave Desert.

As she drove, I told her that I remembered living in the desert years ago. “Nothing is going on out there; the desert is such a sterile and nonproductive part of our country,” I mumbled, as I looked out the window into the dry landscape seemingly devoid of all living things. This comment brought out the biologist in Flo. I should study the ecology of the desert, she said. I would then learn there is a great variety of living things in the desert. Furthermore, she added, they depend on each other for survival. Glancing towards the wriggling pillowcase in the backseat, she returned to my earlier question about why she must take the snake back. Just think, she said, if people picked up animals and depleted the population of certain species, it would upset the whole balance of nature in the desert. That seemed unlikely to me, but I was intrigued by her explanation of how this snake contributed to the ecological balance in her environment, even, cruel as it may sound, as food for another animal. This is important, she said, because they all live on limited resources and must share what little there is in an amazing kind of symbiosis.

We stopped, in the middle of nowhere it seemed. This is where she found the snake, she said, this area south of the Kelso Dunes. We walked a short distance from the van with the pillowcase to
find “the spot” where Flo might have found the snake. The reptile, released from its cloth prison, was stunned at first but quickly adjusted to the warm sand and slithered away into the shade of a dry creosote bush. Miles of sameness wrapped around me. There was no sign of life anywhere, I thought, only dusty bushes as far as my eyes could reach—just like the area that surrounded the camp near Minidoka, Idaho, where I was sent in 1942 along with 120,000 other Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans a few months after the outbreak of World War II.

I had spent a year and a half in what was called an “assembly center,” then moved to an Incarceration Camp in the Idaho desert; I have never been comfortable with desert animals or anything associated with the desert since then. The Japanese immigrants and their American-born children living on the West Coast were removed from their homes by presidential order and found themselves trapped in an inert part of the country, surrounded by barbed wires and watchtowers where armed U.S. soldiers stood guard over them. After leaving Idaho for college, I moved often and always lived in the urban areas of the country. As a resident alien, I never really felt settled anywhere, but I had always felt more at home in places like Chicago and New York City, large cities as far removed from the desert as possible. When my husband made a career change and we moved our family to Southern California, it took me years before I became acclimated to our new home with reminders of camp life: lizards in our backyard and cacti growing wild in uninhabited areas of the neighborhood. Furthermore, compared to New York City, the cultural and intellectual life in the suburbs where we lived seemed barren to me. On that day with Flo, I was back in the “real desert” for the first time in decades.

As we stood there, I noticed a certain orderliness in the way the plants grew in this desert wilderness. They were evenly spaced, as if someone had planted them that way. I thought I could actually smell the dry, clear air. I felt a heightened sense of awareness and spiritual calm as the penetrating midday sun seeped through my pores. The sound of our shoes crunching on the dry earth echoed in the stillness. The hushed silence was a welcome respite after a full schedule of classes and conferences with needy students that morning. We spent less than an hour in the desert before we started back to “civilization,” but, in that short time, I sensed that this was a whole new world I had never known before.
On our drive back, I told Flo that a section of my first book, *Camp Notes and Other Poems*, depicted a rather grim view of the desert. I had written the poems in 1943 while working the night shift in the camp hospital. In “Desert Storm,” one of my poems in this collection, I recounted my sense of besiegement in the desert climate:

Near the mess hall  
along the latrines  
by the laundry  
between tar papered barracks  
the block captain galloped by.  
Take cover everyone he said  
here comes a twister.

Hundreds of windows  
slammed shut.  
Five pairs of hands  
in our room  
with mess hall  
butter knives  
stuffed  
newspapers and rags  
between the cracks.  
But the Idaho dust  
persistent and seeping  
found us crouched  
under the covers.

This was not  
im  
prison  
ment.  
This was  
re  
location.
The desert had held no romantic images for me since my days of incarceration in a camp in the Idaho desert, and yet on that day when I was standing in the middle of the desert in California, I felt strangely moved by the sights, the silence, and the feel of the desert. Flo, a committed nature lover, smiled when she heard me express this. That is what is called the “mystique of the desert,” she said. She reminded me that we Southern Californians live in the desert, but we don’t realize it because our well-watered and manicured gardens have been transformed by importation of water from miles away. The area we now occupy, the suburbs, used to be an undeveloped desert just like this one, but, she said, we have to actually be in the real desert like this to appreciate it. A course in desert ecology is especially important for our students because, she continued, they need to develop a “sense of community with their land.”

Flo was writing her PhD thesis at UCLA at the time, and her talk of trying to find new methods of teaching her standard biology classes piqued my interest because I was also straining at the leash under the prescribed methods of teaching my English classes. As she drove, Flo continued her musings about her “wishful thinking” methods of teaching biology. She said she hoped to bring her biology majors out to the desert on a field trip some day for a few days if she could manage to get permission from her department chair. A thought occurred to both of us almost simultaneously as she talked: why can’t the two of us work on our own department chairs to combine their resources and bring our two groups, the biology and creative writing students, out to the desert together? Because our college forces our students into separate buildings, the science and the humanities buildings, they never have an opportunity to interact with students in other disciplines as Flo and I were doing.

Our conversations in the following weeks revolved around the idea of offering our students field trips called “Desert Experience for Biologists, Poets, and Writers.” We talked about expanding to other wilderness areas—the islands, the mountains, and the forests—and calling the course “Wilderness Experience for Biologists, Poets, and Writers.” Writing the proposal and planning a curriculum for the course was fairly easy, but we needed approval for funding and acceptance of the interdisciplinary concept itself (one administrator complained that it was such an odd pairing “the computer wouldn’t understand”). It would take a couple of years before the interdisciplinary field trips became a reality.
On our first venture with our students, we fully expected them to exchange impressions of the desert from different perspectives and discover their assigned roles in their newly formed community. We learned, however, on our first disastrous trip that it was not enough to subject the students to desert ecology lectures and then throw them together expecting them to share their experiences with each other. On that first trip, the two groups of students did not come together naturally as we had expected. The biology students were there to observe the desert animals in their natural environment. They felt their biological studies and knowledge of the ecosystem in the desert were “useful to humanity,” while the poets were “flakes” whose skills had no practical use at all. The creative writing students felt that the biologists did not understand anything beyond observable facts and their lack of imagination made them incapable of appreciating “beauty for beauty’s sake.” Flo and I talked up a storm. We tried icebreaker games, had campfire cookouts, and encouraged the students to talk about their experiences of the day in small groups. Nothing worked—although in the end, most of the students reported in their final evaluation papers that they had a “good time” and “learned a lot.”

I was more upset about what happened than Flo. She felt that our basic idea was a good one; that this was simply an unfortunate mix of students; and that with another group of students and different dynamics, things would fall into place as we had planned. I, however, felt I needed to prepare my students mentally for their trip because, for some of them, “the biology of the desert” was a completely new idea and they were as awestruck as I was in the beginning. Obviously, we needed to do more than give instructions about camping needs and the rules of conduct in the desert to both groups, as we had done for our first orientation sessions. At those initial joint meetings, we had given students a list of items to pack: the proper type of equipment, clothes, and adequate supplies of food and water. We explained that the ecosystem in the desert was extremely fragile and must be left as untouched as possible. That meant that they had to wrap all garbage and carry it back home with them. Most importantly, they must respect the land and all living things in it. We said nothing about respecting other human beings who might have different goals in life! I tried to think of the most effective way to prepare my students without telling them outright what to expect and what to experience.
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I assigned excerpts from *Desert Solitaire* by Edward Abbey and *The Voice of the Desert* by Joseph Krutch, the two books on desert ecology that were accessible to me at the time. I photocopied a few poems about the desert and desert animals that I could find. Among them were Robert Frost’s “Desert Places,” Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” D. H. Lawrence’s “Bats,” and Emily Dickinson’s “A narrow fellow in the grass.” These poems appeared often in the anthologies I normally used in my literature courses, but it struck me for the first time as I reread them that they were mostly negative images of the desert as “empty spaces” (Frost) or revulsion on the part of the speaker for creatures that are often found in the desert (Dickinson’s “zero at the bone”). In the past, because of my prejudices against the desert acquired during World War II, I never questioned these metaphors. (Only Shelly expressed the awesome power of the desert, or nature, to reclaim its own against the arrogance of the powerful Egyptian King Ramses II, whom the poet referred to as Ozymandias.) These poems became talking points for me to encourage my students to write about their impressions of the desert places with fresh eyes.

I then realized the importance of posing some general philosophical questions to both groups of students, in addition to giving them the nuts and bolts of what they needed for camping in the desert. We compiled a list of questions for discussion: Who is to say who has the “right” kind of relationship to nature? What is the “value” of the desert? When we write about the desert and the flora/fauna in it, are we, in a sense, “using” them for our own purposes? When, during the course of these discussions, students started to bring into the classroom related articles and poems they had found from their own readings, we felt gratified that we were getting through to some of them at last. It would take a few more trips, a few more years, for us to compile a proper bibliography of readings and collect an adequate set of slides for orientation sessions. Gradually, the social atmosphere during subsequent trips improved, and things “fell into place,” as Flo had predicted.

In personal terms, these semiannual field trips to the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area and the Joshua Tree National Monument that spanned several years had a profound effect on me—more, I believe, than on any of my students. My reintroduction to the desert came at a time when I was more than ready to incorporate new ideas into my system of thought and gave me a language to speak openly about the way I related to my environment.
It validated my previous efforts in my approach to teaching that had come about almost by chance. I had been learning “on the job” and was quietly trying to make changes on my own in both my composition and literature classes.

The transformation had already begun a few years before my introduction to the California desert. I had met feminist poets and writers in San Francisco whose voices urgently called for inclusiveness and diversity in all institutions. Their writings spoke to me with an immediacy that very few writings had done before. Among them was Alta, an energetic feminist poet, who founded the country’s first feminist publishing house, The Shameless Hussy Press, in 1969. Alta became the publisher of my first book of poems. Before the publication of my book, she scheduled prepublication readings in the Bay Area for me at women’s conferences, women’s health centers, and lesbian bars. The women’s movement was making historical and social changes all around me.

By 1980, each additional new knowledge about the desert resonated for me, a slow bloomer who became “awake” late in life. By that time, I had already processed my own identity and introduced myself as an Asian American feminist poet at readings. After the publication of my book, I was often asked at readings and panel discussions in which I participated how I self-identified. Was I a woman first or an Asian American first? Where did my loyalties lie? Was I an Asian or an American? What were my priorities? Was I for human rights or women’s rights?

The trips into the desert made me realize that these differences are imposed by the mainstream culture and that I should not be intimidated by them. Like the desert, I will simply be myself. The desert would stubbornly return to her own natural self if left alone for a period of time, even after being transformed into a grand city by means of modern technology. I identified with the desert, for she appeared to be, like me, a female personality emerging out of obscurity. I identified with the desert because I was always a bookish person, socially inept and shy. I saw that the desert’s seeming inertness and silence did not mean there was no activity there. Many of her animals and plants are nocturnal and can be seen only at night with a flashlight. They reveal themselves on their own terms. Some flowers bloom in long intervals, such as the Joshua tree, bearing flowers every seven years. Compiling a collection of slides of desert animals and plants to show to our students took several years of watchful patience, day and night, on our part. I saw that the most
unassuming-looking flowers burst into astonishing multicolored blooms when examined closely under a microscope (Flo always brought one on our outings). I recounted this new appreciation for the desert in a poem, “Desert Under Glass,” published some years later in Desert Run: Poems and Stories:

Look at the buckwheat
magnified
the biologist
coxes my myopic eye
over glass
a dusty round desert flower
with a humble household name
blooms
a cluster of brilliant
or chide-like shapes and colors
the buckwheat
growing on a crust
of unmasked earth
can be seen
by one
steady
inward
eye.

I saw for myself how the animals and plants quietly shared limited resources. I admired the desert’s stubborn insistence on retaining her essential character in spite of human intrusions into her territory. I came to understand and accept the volatile weather conditions in the desert—the extreme heat and cold, the sudden rains, the violent windstorms—as part of nature’s cycles. (One morning after howling winds kept us awake all night, one of my students remarked good-naturedly, “My, was she temperamental last night.”)

Only after some understanding of the desert areas did the literal use of the desert for discarding toxic waste, testing atom bombs, and building prisons become repugnant to me. I became aware of environmental justice movements and their advocates.
Having been introduced to the small publishers’ world by Alta, I discovered an iconoclastic work, newly published by a small press: *Green Paradise Lost* by feminist theologian and environmentalist Elizabeth Dodson Gray. In this work, the author traces our present ecological crisis back to the Judeo-Christian worldview. Gray makes us examine the deep-rooted causes of our biases towards others unlike ourselves and the dire consequences of our attitudes. She writes that man has interpreted the Biblical text in hierarchical terms, giving humans dominion over all of nature. My students and I studied her cosmological pyramid, where God is at the apex; below God come men; below men come women; below women come children, animals, and plants; and “below them all is the ground of nature itself” (3). Our hierarchical thinking, she believes, gives us permission to exploit those who rank below us as “the Other . . . the Other as another culture . . . below me . . . less powerful” (20). Through these discussions, my students began to find new ways of expressing their observations of desert life beyond the physical descriptions of the land and its inhabitants. Some of the students found new areas of interest outside our prescribed agenda, such as the discovery of the original inhabitants in the desert. They said they had heard that American Indians were the original inhabitants of California, but when they were physically in the desert, they “sensed the presence” of the Chemehuevi Indians in the southeast area of the Mojave Desert. The quality of my students’ work improved, for they plunged into writing more intuitively and with a greater sense of history.

The success in initiating a course that did not fit into the regular curriculum at the time changed the way that I saw my role both in the college where I taught and in the community. Cultural adaptation had always been an accepted role in my upbringing. My parents, although they came to settle and raise a family of American children as early as the 1920s, always felt like sojourners and acted as though they were guests who were expected to behave themselves. During my childhood, they always impressed on me that as an alien Japanese ineligible for citizenship in this country, I must defer to my “hosts” at all times. These desert trips gave me courage to introduce to my department my own ideas about teaching as well as new approaches that I had read about in academic journals. I also was encouraged to move out of the academic circles to take some of my programs into the community. When Flo and I were asked to participate in the cultural arts extension series being
offered by the Women’s Building in Los Angeles, we immediately accepted. We offered a weekend field trip called “Wilderness Experience for Women” for women artists, photographers, poets, writers, and nature lovers.

This group, older than our undergraduate students, had never had any kind of camping experience before this trip and needed more guidance. Some were more fearful than our students, who plunged into the experience with more abandon than we often wanted. At the Kelso Dunes, my exuberant college students spent most of their time jumping and sliding on the hot sand to create the “great boom” they had read about. The women, on the other hand, were content to sit quietly and take in the scenery, the smooth and voluptuous mounds of sand. We sat and reflected on how they resembled the shapes of women’s bodies: from the front, the breasts and abdomen; from the back, the buttocks, the waist, and shoulder blades. No wonder, one of the women exclaimed, we call this Mother Nature! These women were also more productive. I was inspired by them to finish my own collection of desert poems and published them in Desert Run: Poems and Stories.

By this time, the desert had permeated my thinking so completely that I often used a desert metaphor to argue a point in unexpected places. At one of the board meetings of Amnesty International USA, I proposed that we create a committee on cultural diversity. When a director asked, “What does that mean?” I found myself suggesting that he should study desert ecology. I explained just as I had done many times before to our students that diversity was not only enriching but also necessary for our survival. With a new feminist consciousness, I began to see the connections between my writing and my peace and human rights work. I had joined Amnesty International in the 1960s to write letters on behalf of an Iranian poet whose poems were interpreted by his government as criticism of the Shah of Iran and who was imprisoned and tortured. I then learned that many writers, poets, educators, and religious leaders, as well as human rights workers, suffered the same fate throughout the world. Amnesty International is a worldwide organization with the specific mandate to work “impartially for immediate release of prisoners of conscience; fair and prompt trials for all political prisoners; and the end to torture and executions.” Amnesty’s position is that we bear responsibility for the plight of others because those who are being exploited by their own tyrannical governments or find themselves in oppressive
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social situations can neither defend themselves nor expect others to jeopardize their own lives by coming to their rescue. I was often reminded that the quiet desert also needs advocates from destructive forces that would slowly encroach on its territory in the name of urban development. The separate parts of my life—my own writing, my teaching, my active involvement in women’s, peace, and human rights movements—were finally coming together into an integrated whole.

Most rewarding was my greater appreciation for the research that my husband was doing in his retirement at the time. After twenty-five years of working for large corporations as a research chemist, he had decided to return to his old interest in art and write a book about the close relationship between the scientific and artistic minds. He became very interested in our “desert experiment.” He suggested that I assign Snow’s *The Two Cultures* when I spoke to him about the breakdown of communication between our two groups of students during our first desert trip. He said that the controversy over Snow’s work showed that lack of communication between the arts and sciences is nothing new. I persuaded my husband to give talks to our students at our orientation sessions, because his extensive knowledge of both the sciences and the arts were pertinent to what we were planning for our presentation. As a scientist who had had a successful career in industry and as a talented artist who had exhibited his watercolor paintings at museums in the past, he commanded a measure of respect from both the science and creative writing students.

I am no longer a sojourner here in California. Although I have lived in this country since I was three-and-a-half years old (I became eligible for citizenship only after the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952), I am now adapted to the rhythms of the desert and my adopted country and have become an inhabitant. I retired from full-time teaching years ago but have not retired entirely from teaching or living. In my own backyard, there are a mixture of many types of flora and fauna, from the jungle to the desert, and here a single action must have many, many effects ecologically. Most of what I presently do consciously involves a multicultural perspective, for a single action in multicultural terms does not move in one direction. As an Asian American woman writer and teacher, I know that what I do and write has multiple cultural
implications among women, among Asian Americans, among Asian cultures, and among other areas of the communities I live in. The eloquent environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams, in pleading for the right of the wilderness to exist, writes that every individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. She carries with her the legacy of another early advocate of the wilderness who, she writes, “inspired us to see that in the richness of biological systems all heartbeats are held as one unified pulse in a diversified world” (175). In these unbearably troubling times for millions of people all over the world, this may sound too simplistic, but it is a goal towards which we must work and struggle.

The desert is the lungs of the world.
This land of sudden lizards and nappy ants
is only useful when not used⁴

Notes
1. My colleague, Florence McAlary, earned her PhD in biology from UCLA in 1985. She taught biology at Cypress College from 1966 to 1989. She is presently an independent researcher at Friday Harbor Laboratory, University of Washington.
3. The McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 made it possible for Asian immigrants to become naturalized citizens for the first time in the history of this country. Until then, my parents, who had been living in the U.S. for over forty years, and I were resident aliens.

Bibliography


