

## Outline of our Session: Land, Language, Survival: Women Eco-Writers. A Multiple Literary Genres Reading

Women eco-writers share language, survival, and land practices. Margaret Noodin discusses Anishinaabemowin/English poetry and the power of knowing one place well. Ann Fisher-Wirth writes about chronic illness and meditation in Mississippi. DJ Lee writes about the Selway Wilderness, ghost forests, and her mysterious grandmother. Pam Uschuk discusses Southwestern wild lands, refugee crossings, and healing from cancer. Petra Kuppers, a disabled Michigan settler, moves with insects and mushrooms.

This panel offers perspectives from five different women eco-writers - three settlers, one indigenous, one foreign-born - about living on land, survival, and language. It offers a mix of locations (Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, Mississippi, and Idaho/Montana), forms (poetry/lyric memoir/performance writing), and ranks (independent artists, Associate and Full Professors). Panelists link their work explicitly to health and disability, and to natural and cultural survival.

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Land, Language, Survival: Women Eco-Writers

Margaret Noodin - Anishinaabemowin/English poetry and the power of knowing a place well.

A reading from:

*Gijigijigaaneshiinh Gikendaan: What the Chickadee Knows*

Wayne State University Press, 2020

Jichibakozh Jichaag

Rock Your Soul

Gibagidinaan zanagak,

Release impossibilities

jichaagowazisoniken.

build a nest for your soul.

Gijichibakozhaa jichaag

Rock your soul inside

asiginaman anoonji gegoon.

the space you have gathered.

Gaawiin waabandansiinaawaa

What they don't see

akiing gaye mitigong

on the ground and in the trees

aazhidetamowinan wewebaasinoog.

are the answers swaying.

Ezhi-mino-anwebiyang

As we find peaceful sleep.

Ezhi-minjimininjiizhidiyang.

As we connect our dreams.

Gibagidinaan zegaanakwag

Release the dark storms

mii dash zhawenimegwaa.

and you will be blessed.

Baakaakonan ishkwandeman

Fill the emptiness behind

mewinzha gii-gibaakwa'aman.

all the doors you once closed.

Gakina waa-waabandaanaawaa

Then they will see

ishkwaakidesagoon

the bright embers

waakaabimaadiziwining

that protect our lives.

Naabibii'aan Agoodeg

Omaada'adon ziigwan-mazina'igan  
anaamayi'ii baashkabiizhigong  
gaye apane dibiki-giizisan basangwaabinid  
mii abid ningide-niibinong.

Onaabibii'aan ziiginigaadenig ziibiin  
zhaabwayi'ii endazhi-baashkaabigwaniinig  
niibina-enaandenig maamawaginjigewinan  
waawaagitigweyaakwaang.

Imaa epiichi-maamwibemaadizijig  
aaboozikadendizowaad  
agawaatesewaad gaye waaseyaaziwaad  
mikamaang agoodeg.

Tracing Balance

She follows the map of spring  
under the sky's one bursting eye  
and the ever-blinking moon  
into the melt of summer.

He traces the pouring river  
through blossoms bursting  
multi-colored equations  
winding into the woods.

There while society  
turns itself inside out  
the shadow and the shining  
find balance.

Section from Petra  
Kuppers: **Gut Botany**,  
Wayne State University  
Press, Detroit, 2020.  
Contact:  
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*GUT BODY*





Sucker punch, the knife in the street  
fear of being sheared out of the stream  
into the backwater  
dead fish belly up by the side of the pond  
pills and poisons and endings  
let go and sever the ties and ignore  
the party is always elsewhere  
a shadow in a canoe in a photo  
likely put on Facebook tomorrow:  
fake of having fun behind  
the grass, tree, a Stephen King book  
where I know the next sentence already  
primacy of white masculine fear  
close the leaky gut, body drained of tears.

Just speak, walk with me, close the loop.

Bow forward, pour yourself into your capable hands, and hold your heart.

Bow forward, pour your stomach into your feeble hands, release the binds that bind so tightly to your spinal column.

Bow again, drop your sexual organs into waiting hands, wait. Breathe in, out, in, soothe.

Fish slip into the labyrinth of intestines. Cruise past the atlas, feed on the carpet fibers of worry.

Agile between the lung pearls, hollow behind the liver, green wall, delicate black veins spider along for companionship, dark purple, maroon.

Fins soothe the red spots of tension, white bands where muscles have leached nourishment out of tight bands.

Between kidney and uterus, raspy tongue licks soggy dahlias on their stalks, ovaries bloom.

Glide, mucous oils the way. Swim among the velvet. You, and me, into plump cushions: sturgeon tumbling ground.



Found on an Oregonian Playa

Barbed wire: do not walk here  
if you are a cow, your hooves will puncture and swell  
gush bloody puss on the desiccated land  
boils explode on the grey cacti, clings on to life,  
roots deep in the pores of pumice, treacherous hold,  
one gust of the night wind and plants pummel across  
the basin, their heads dipped into one shallow bowl  
of salty sour water, a mirage, drift past already, gone,  
the storm gusts you till you are spiked on farm machinery  
and the lever of the long-dry pump of the old corral.  
Do not walk here, in the land of light stones and ancient wire,  
there is no hold fit for the hitching.

## Found in the Cave

Ejected gun shell pops echoes and scars  
what might be home for a little club of moles, or  
a coyote mama ready to plush her nest against  
the pockmarked sandstone wall.

Mice bones: dart between the little lead pellets,  
ears twitching against the bat sonar, far below the  
long booming plaaaong of the gun which you register  
as whisker's gust of wind. With luck, some rain, enough to  
moisten the next shelf down, the dry arroyo,  
and the kernel that you had left there, with no one  
to tell you why, and how a mouse could harvest  
the tallness of even a little reddish heirloom maize.

## Found on the Pond Deck

The husk of a tiny dragonfly, translucent,  
clings upside down on a yellow spear of grass  
its roots clasp the dry wood of the deck.  
Tiny white fibers everywhere: the planks, breathing,  
expectorate their innards, wood weeps and uncoils  
what it knew when it stood, tall in a wet Redwood forest,  
before the chains of a truckbed, dark and long, bite, here,  
where all trees are twisted into themselves against  
the prevailing winds. On that white-spun deck,  
I remember my watery nature, pour my liquid body  
to wash away the pain of the shorter years,  
to wash away the pain of a hollow embrace,  
the feeling that we all will slide, not into the clear pool,  
but into the murk of a place that should not be settled.

Ann Fisher Wirth

For the panel “Land, Language, Survival,” I was scheduled to talk about “meditation and chronic illness in Mississippi.” I have had rheumatoid arthritis for decades—probably my whole adult life, though it wasn’t diagnosed until fifteen years ago. Since then, I’ve been on methotrexate, a chemo drug, which has pretty much controlled my rheumatoid arthritis, though my body continues to tweak out and at least some pain is constant. Partly for this reason, I can’t imagine my life without yoga and meditation. I’ve practiced yoga as a spiritual and physical discipline for forty-four years, and for the past decade I’ve taught gentle and restorative yoga at Southern Star in Oxford, Mississippi. Yoga has not only enabled me to stay flexible and active, but as I decline toward death, it has also given me a great sense of peace and bliss, deeper and more lasting than any personal trouble. It benefits my spirit and body and it’s a gift I can offer my students, to help them sustain their own lasting sources of renewal.

But as I thought about “land, language, survival,” my thoughts kept turning to recent events that have attracted national attention—the prison murders at Parchman, Mississippi State Penitentiary, and elsewhere in Mississippi, in which by now over a dozen inmates have died. Parchman Farm, as it is known, is notorious and you are all probably familiar with its history of violence, inhumane conditions, and racial oppression. Now, the Justice Department has just announced a civil rights investigation into the prison that has been described as severely understaffed, controlled by gangs, and in a “state of acute and undeniable crisis.” An article in the *New York Times* mentions “broken toilets, holes in prison walls, dangling wires and dead rodents caught in sticky traps,” as well as “a long record of violence, escapes, uprisings, inadequate health care and institutions where criminal gangs are tolerated.” (Rick Rojas, *NYT*,

Feb 5, 2020) Researching for this talk, I started to look at current photographs from Parchman that prisoners have taken on illegal cellphones—but had to stop, because I was going to vomit.

So I wanted, instead of talking about myself, to describe my experience team-teaching at Parchman, working with men—both black and white—for whom land, language, and survival have always been in jeopardy.

Several years ago, Professor Otis Pickett of Mississippi College and my colleague Professor Patrick Alexander created a program called the Prison to College Pipeline, to offer some access to college education and some path to re-entry for incarcerated individuals. For two semesters, Patrick and I team-taught once a week in Unit 25, Parchman’s pre-release unit. Patrick taught African American literature of incarceration and freedom, and I taught creative writing—both poetry and environmental life writing. I also taught a little bit of yoga—breathing, simple stretching—and the men were saying how much they needed it, but several authorities came to the doorway to watch, and afterwards, told me I was not allowed to sit on the floor. Most of the men in this unit would be released within two years, but a few had been incarcerated seemingly forever, and we thought they might be there to serve as wisdom figures or guides for the younger men.

Teaching at Parchman affected me more deeply than I could ever say—emotionally, politically, spiritually. I’ve written about this experience in a piece called “The Astonishing Light,” which was published in *About Place Journal*. Today I’d like to share some outtakes from that piece, as well as a little of the published essay for context.

. . .

November 2017: 18,000 acres of Parchman penitentiary stretch out all around us in the middle of the Delta, flat as a board. Meager white houses dot the road down which we drive from

the entrance gate to the prerelease complex, Unit 25—houses where guards live with their families. Outside some, a swing set or kids' bikes, with no kids. This week, Hallowe'en decorations—a huge black plastic ogre, fake spiderwebs draped over bushes and porches. At one house, red, orange, and white pumpkins perch on top of each other like little snowmen. We pass a tool building, more fences, bare fields, some tractors. Off to the right, down a road we don't follow, the high walls of maximum security. Off in the distance, to the left across fields, a low dark building all by itself— Death Row, swarming with guard towers.

...

And once, far off, a house burned in a field, the upper half consumed, a fright wig of flame. One fireman stood near it with a hose, spraying water, watching it burn. When we asked, the guards at the entrance gate didn't know about it, the GED teachers didn't know about it. No one was near the house except that lone fireman. I would say I dreamed it except Patrick and I both saw it. Next week there was neither trace nor sign.

...

I see only what I see. The education building that *does* have heat and a.c., the airy white classroom, a blackboard that Patrick covers with writing, a semicircle of chairs, the spotless green linoleum floor, windows that look onto the fence surrounding the building with its razor wire coils. Occasional flurries of little birds. Sparse grass, and sometimes, tiny blue daisies. The building from which our students come and into which, every week, they vanish. I'd like to know who they are, how they ended up here, but I don't ask, nor what they will do once released, who waits for them, which babies have learned to walk in their absence, which mothers or lovers wait or do not wait for their return. I know enough about Mississippi to know that for most of these men there will be no forgiveness, they'll travel with FELON stamped on them, and what

the frat boys do at their parties would land these men here. One of our students who used to work at my university for Cobra security says, *Y'all have no idea what goes down in them on-campus houses, the drugs, rough partying. On the Square they have to tone it down because the cops are watching.* I'd like to know what they did, but unless one man tells the class, *Forty-two years ago I shot a man* or another writes on a website he asks me to read, *Found Jesus at nineteen, married at twenty, committed murder at twenty-one*, I won't know.

...

Today, watching bamboo sway in the cold dull rain outside my window, I remember the soft-spoken man who came by two winters ago to ask for work. He was homeless, without family, not from around here, so I wondered if he'd been released from prison. I tried to find a shelter for him but there are none in Oxford, and the nearest one, in Tupelo an hour away, was full, so for a while he slept in the stock room of the Piggly Wiggly. *It be warm there*, he said, *they let me stay a few nights when the store be close.* And then he disappeared. And I think of Alger, from our class, who said, *I came up for parole after 28 years in 2003 but my father had died and my sister had died and then at Christmastime 2002 my mother passed too. I had no place to go, so they kept me here at Parchman.*

...

Patrick is teaching Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* and the discussion becomes so intense that when it's my turn to teach, our guys just want to let off steam, joking around, gently punching each other in the arm. We're having our final workshop. We critique pieces about Larry's junior high and high school football career, Carl's alcoholic grandpa, Stanley's yearly squirrel hunts. The men are loving with each other, praising how the pieces have grown. Then Alger becomes serious; there's something he wants to tell us. *Three of us bunked near this*

*guy named Richards. They called the ambulance for him first time he writhed on his bed, and the doctor sent him home untested with a bottle of Tums. They called the ambulance for him second time he writhed on his bed, and the doctor sent him home untested with a bottle of Xanax. Third time he writhed on his bed, after lunchtime today, he was dead.*

...

I wake up feeling useless, desolate, and angry. For just a little while, pray God, I need to think about things other than the things for which I've been learning the names: white supremacy, state-caused premature death, systematic under-education, racial profiling, the carceral state, the legacy of slavery. I sit at my desk and stare at the pecan leaves thick on the ground outside my window, the blue wintering sky, the black slats of window shutters on the gleaming white house next door. *See: I can't escape it*, I mutter to myself. *Black / white...* Parchman grinds men up and spits them out. The misery is depthless and endless.

...

*Mississippi* grinds men up and spits them out. Right now Ricky is mowing the front yard—Ricky Brooks, who cannot read and loses more teeth every year, who comes by our house in Oxford when he needs rent money or gas money to get to Memphis or Jackson or Hattiesburg for yet another family funeral. He has owed us money for the 31 years we have lived here. In the soft November light I hear our mower grinding up pecan leaves. After he finishes our yard, he borrows the mower to work down the street. I'm raking the driveway when Ricky returns with the mower. *You inspired me*, I tell him. *You mad at me, mama?* he asks me. *Ah*, I say. *Inspired*. It means you gave me a good idea. First time I've ever seen him smile.

...

“The astonishing light”—my phrase for the pain and joy I felt working with the men in my class at Parchman, who were finding language through their poems and life narratives. I’d like to end with that, rather than with the ongoing, the inconclusive. But I can’t. Alger finally was released, after forty-two years; a Catholic priest, with whom he became friends, found him a place to live in Jackson. We talked on the phone once. He has work, a church community, even a lady friend. But Ricky is in Parchman now, for his third DUI. We gave him money to get a lawyer, and he pled his sentence down from five years to eighteen months. I think of him in a place where everyone has weapons. I think of him in lock-down. I hope he, and the men who were my students, will survive.