

# **Sand and Snow: Native and Non-Native Storytelling in the American Southwest and the Far North**

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## **Academic Setting**

The target audience for this material is gifted high school students. The readings, the complexity of the concepts and the hands-on activities may be adjusted for middle

school gifted students, and for regular education honors language arts students. Numerous resources are available in a spectrum of reading levels, facilitating adaptation and enhancement by individual teachers of the materials suggested here. This unit meets New Mexico content standards for Language Arts.

It should be noted that inherent in the Native American storytelling tradition is a reluctance to openly share stories with non-Natives, probably because they are considered imbedded in the culture and not meant to exist outside of that context. Some stories are considered too sacred to be told except by selected people, such as shamens; others are considered the domain of certain clans and can be told only by clan members. If you have Native American students, this may be a sensitive issue worth considering. All the stories mentioned here are published works; none is known to be inappropriately used.

I teach Great Books/Communication Skills to gifted high school students, grades 9-12 at Valley High School in the historic North Rio Grande Valley area of Albuquerque, New Mexico. My students are of varied ethnic and racial origins, including Hispanic, Anglo, Native American, and Asian. Although stereotyped as models of academic perfection, many gifted students are disengaged from school and its environment. Their superior cognitive ability often works against them, compromising their ability to adjust to what they view as mundane academic demands and making social interactions with age-mates difficult or unsatisfactory.

Perhaps thirty percent of my students are mature, reasonably well-adjusted high achievers, but a large number of others need help with major academic, emotional, and social issues. I teach seminars with 12 or fewer participants, so I am able to get to know the students well and to have a more personal relationship with them than would be possible in larger classes. Valley High School is an interesting venue for teaching because the cultural diversity of the students results in a variety of viewpoints on a given issue. The seminar format of my classes allows the students to engage in extended discussion and analysis of content material rather than simply its acquisition; the primary goal of the class is to increase students' critical and creative thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Cultural customs and philosophical issues related to developing a personal philosophy are topics of great interest to my students. This interest seems to relate to the well-documented search

for the self during the years from 14-18.

This unit encourages students to examine symbols of cultural identity of several Native peoples in depth and to discuss their findings in relation to their own identities. The gifted seminar is an opportune setting for exploring other cultures vicariously and engaging in thoughtful group discussions of symbolic meaning related to perceived iconography. Students will be encouraged to construct individual meaning from the material presented; the final lesson plans of the unit generate artistic products through which students demonstrate their individual constructs.

The general objectives of the unit are as follows:

- Develop student awareness of the common and divergent themes and symbols specifically as they relate to the natural landscapes of the targeted regions.
- Use critical and creative thinking skills to identify, analyze, and compare potent iconographic symbols of the two regions and to pose and answer questions of interpretation of these symbols relative to the environments in which they appear.
- Compare native and non-native literary works of the regions with a view to the ecological derivations of stories, themes, and symbols.
- Develop an understanding of the sense of place and its importance to the cultural, social, and emotional life of the individual, both literateur and layman.
- Develop an understanding of the art of storytelling and its importance culturally and socially.
- Evaluate the merits and faults of ecocriticism as a critical mechanism.
- Evaluate the effects of the explorations in this unit on our individual understanding of nature through literature.

## **Narrative**

This teaching unit was prompted by the genre of literary criticism known as "ecocriticism," or "ecological literary criticism," defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the environment in which it is produced. Some of the key questions asked in ecocriticism are:

- What constitutes environmental literature?
- What is the role of literature in shaping environmental consciousness?
- What are the influences of class, ethnicity, and gender on human representations of the environment?

- How does literature affect our role as human participants in our natural environment? (1)

In *The Environmental Imagination* the ecocritic Lawrence Buell proposes an alternative to the customary critical approach to literature that views environment as merely the setting for the narrative. Buell encourages us to view the landscape as active, not as background. For example, the Mississippi River in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Walden Pond in Thoreau's *Walden* are more than mere venues for the unfolding of events – they are events themselves and shape the action in ways that are unique and powerful. Using Thoreau as a touchstone for the beginning of the ecology movement in America, Buell proposes that our deteriorating environment is the result of a creative crisis in the way we perceive both nature and our relationship to her. We need to reexamine our relationship to nature before we can make amends to the environment we have altered so broadly. In *The Environmental Imagination* Buell suggests that we begin that re-examination with American literature by looking "searchingly at the most searching works of environmental reflection that the world's biggest technological power has produced; for in these we may expect to find disclosed...both the pathologies that bedevil society at large and some of the alternative paths that it might consider" (2). Buell counsels us to pay attention to what he calls "environmentally oriented work," in which the environment is not subsumed by descriptions of human affairs, but is seen as having a story of its own which is important to the narrative. Such works (for example, *Walden*) also encourage responsible stewardship of the land by its human inhabitants (6-8).

An important objective of the unit is to develop student understanding of the definition of a sense of place and its role in regional cultures as revealed in the literature of those cultures. Buell defines the sense of place as complex knowledge of one's place in the living environment, including a concern for its recuperative limitations when subjected to abuse and overuse. In *The Environmental Imagination* Buell quotes Wendell Berry: "Without a complex knowledge of one's place, and without the faithfulness to one's place on which such knowledge depends, it is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" (253). (This is in fact what many leaders of the Ecology Movement think is happening in the world today). By place, Buell means not merely the physical setting, which is a salient property of place, but the human experiences which occur in and are engendered by that space. In the ecocritical context presented here, place is seen not as passive, but as interactive because we are shaped by place and we in turn shape it. Ecocritics like Buell propose that our sense of place is what determines our respect for the land, and that it is when our sense of place lacks authenticity, or is ill-formed and unattended to, that we damage the land the most. As Buell explains, "What we require, then, is neither disparagement nor celebration of place-sense, but an account of those specific conditions under which it significantly furthers...environmental humility, an awakened place-awareness that is also mindful of its limitations and respectful that

place molds us as well as vice versa" (253). The sense of place that speaks loudly in the literature of Native peoples of the desert and arctic tundra is an important reason that Native stories were chosen this unit. For the peoples studied here, knowledge of place is of necessity culturally imbedded, being essential for survival in the unforgiving environments that they inhabit. It is proposed that each student will use the definition of a sense of place and its role in regional literature as presented in this unit to examine and refine or reformulate his/her own sense of place as an important part of an ongoing search for identity.

By attending to the viewpoint that Buell proposes, we can approach literature with our students in a frame of mind that allows us an expanded perspective for evaluation. We can read nature writers, Native and non-Native, anew, distinguishing between conventional means of textual analysis and interpretive breakthroughs that occur as a result of an ecocritical approach. Once on the path, we can examine the merits and faults of ecocriticism and evaluate the effects on our own personal understanding of nature through literature as a result of our exploration.

In this unit, the Native literature to be examined emerges from the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, chosen because they are the two most numerous groups among Native Americans of the Southwest, and from the Inuits of the Far North region of Alaska and the Yukon. These groups have been selected for the variety and accessibility of materials on their oral traditions, and because they inhabit regions where place-sense is crucial to survival. For both groups, prudent stewardship of the land is imperative, lest both land and culture perish. In her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, Leslie Silko, a prominent author from Laguna Pueblo, says regarding the Hopi landscape,

The bare but beautiful vastness...emphasizes the visual impact of every plant, every rock, every arroyo. Nothing is overlooked or taken for granted. Each ant, each lizard, each lark is imbued with great value simply because the creature is alive in a place where any life at all is precious. Stand on the mesa's edge at Walpi and look southwest over the bare distances toward the pale blue outlines of the San Francisco Peaks (north of Flagstaff) where the ka'tsina spirits reside. So little lies between you and the sky. So little lies between you and the earth. One look and you know that simply to survive is a great triumph, that every possible resource is needed, every possible ally—even the most humble insect or reptile. You realize you will be speaking with all of them if you intend to last out the year. Thus it is that the Hopi elders are grateful to the landscape for aiding them in their quest as spiritual people (40-41).

Much the same may be said for the Far North, where a similar scarcity of flora and fauna underscores the important role of each living thing in the ecosystem. The intensity and uniqueness of the extreme and opposing landscapes of the desert and the arctic tundra have spawned a broad selection of both Native and non-Native literary works in which environmental forces are undeniable. The power and distinctiveness of these landscapes enables us to view them as main characters in the story, as Buell urges, rather than as scenic backdrops.

Storytelling has been chosen as a focus for the unit for several reasons. The brevity of the material allows for the inclusion of a rich variety of cultural sources, and students can build on a cultural context which they already possess at least in rudimentary form, presumably having been engaged in storytelling activities in their younger years. In addition, the complexity of the lore and the beliefs which support it are suitable touchstones for the attentions of gifted students, who have a tendency to be ethos-minded.

The non-Native literature that begins the unit, including Jack London's story "To Build a Fire" and Edward Abbey's "Down the River" essay from *Desert Solitaire*, have been chosen to provide a cultural framework proximate to that of the students' modern American sensibility. It is hoped that the inherent exploratory, adventurous energy of these works will draw the students into the topic. It is expected that they will begin to understand the centrality of the sense of place to the stories. And it is required that they identify iconic elements the regions have in common and those elements that are unique, for comparative and analytical purposes.

### Ethnography

Navajo and Pueblo peoples of the Southwest and Inuits of the Far North share many similarities historically, culturally, socially, and aesthetically, providing an abundance of images for student exploration and commentary. Some of these commonalities include East Asian origin, communal social organization, extensive use of animal imagery in art, storytelling as a powerfully communicative art form, nature-based religion with shaman as link to the spirit world, and intensive use of available natural resources for survival. Another, infamous, commonality is that their interactions with non-Native settlers involving land, power, and resources have led to enforced relocation and contamination of all these Native cultures to varying degrees.

Native habitation in the Southwest, beginning with hunter-gatherer groups, dates from about 5000 B.C.E. Villages of pit houses appear around 1000 B.C.E, with several major cultures developing, including the Mogollon, Sinagua, Cohonina, Hohokam, Yuman, and Anasazi. Of these cultures, probably the best known is the Anasazi, which evolved from basket-making, maize cultivation, and pit houses to the building of elaborate communal structures such as the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde and Canyon de Chelly. The Pueblo people, such as the Hopi, Zuni, and the Rio Grande peoples, are descendants of these groups; their languages are of the

Keresan family. The Navajo migrated to the region in the early sixteenth century. It is important to note that the Athabascan-speaking Navajo were historically sheep herders who led solitary lives and lived in single-family dome-shaped dwellings known as hogans, whereas the Pueblo peoples were primarily agriculturists skilled in dry land cultivation who lived in large adobe-brick complexes built around a central gathering place (Leeming and Page 10-11). Contributing to the sense of place for all desert peoples are environmental factors such as extreme aridity, scarceness of water, and vast open landscapes. For Southwest peoples, as for the natives of the Far North, the environment is inherently harsh and unforgiving, thereby forcing humans to develop an awareness of, and accord with, their surroundings or perish.

The native inhabitants of the Far North are known as Inuit, which means "the people" in their language, Inuktitut, just as the Navajos call themselves "Dine," or "the people," in the Navajo language. (It may be interesting to consider with the students what this might indicate about Native conceptions of man in relation to the environment. Is it hubris, perhaps, assuming that one's group stands for all mankind? Could it represent an enviable comfort with one's place in the landscape?) The less-favored term "eskimo" is an Algonquian name for the Inuit, meaning "eaters of raw meat." Anthropologists hypothesize that the Inuit came to North America from Asia about eight to ten thousand years ago by crossing the Bering Sea. They settled primarily in the area near the Arctic Circle, a region of severe climatic conditions, including long winters with average temperatures of -20 to -30 degrees Fahrenheit, a layer of rock-hard topsoil known as permafrost, and days so short that on December 22nd there is no sunrise at all. In the treeless Arctic landscape, barren of livestock and crops, the people survived by hunting caribou, seals, walruses, polar bears, beluga whales, musk oxen, fish, and birds. Ownership of the land was collective, each community connected with the area it normally inhabited or migrated within. The Inuit followed migrating animals and sought berries and roots in summer to supplement their diet of meat (Bonvillain 27).

In addition to physical rigors, both Southwest desert and Arctic tundra pose challenges to the psyches of their human inhabitants. Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams* writes, "The Arctic, overall, has the classic lines of a desert landscape: spare, balanced, extended, and quiet...The apparent monotony of the land is relieved, however, by weather systems moving through, and by the activities of animals...And because so much of the country stands revealed, and because sunlight passing through the dustless air renders its edges with such unusual sharpness, animals linger before the eye. And their presence is vivid" (xxi-xxii). The broadness of the sky and land in both places and the sense of loneliness and isolation that they engender, have the power to underscore man's insignificance in the landscape and the indifference of nature. We will examine the stories for evidence of the psychological impact of the landscapes and for images and rituals that may be employed in the literature to ameliorate man's concerns.

The peoples in both the Southwest and the Far North struggle to maintain their cultural identity amid the non-native majority. It is common to use the past tense in describing these native peoples because their cultures do not exist any more in unadulterated form. Just as the Navajo and Pueblo Indians have seen their territories restructured and restricted, the natives of the Arctic Circle have endured governmental reductions in their vast territories. The requiem for the Inuit is rather recent – their way of life was virtually unchanged until the 1950's, when they experienced large-scale relocation efforts at the hands of well-meaning but misguided Canadian and U.S. governments. The alteration of Navajo and Pueblo cultures has taken place over a longer period of time but is similarly invasive. Hogans and igloos have been replaced by tract housing, horses and dog sleds by pick-up trucks and snowmobiles. A culture facing physical dislocation and invasive foreign technology must adapt or perish. Native peoples of North America have done some of both. A portion of this unit is designed to consider the impact of these changes on the Native peoples' stories, and to attempt to understand elements that remain constant despite the pressures of outside cultural contacts.

### Oral Tradition

Storytelling as a culturally relevatory art form is an important focus of this teaching unit. The oral traditions of Native peoples provide entertainment, social interaction for all age-groups, and the transmission of rituals, myths, precautions, remonstrations, advice and other intergenerational knowledge. Leslie Silko, a prominent contemporary Native American writer and storyteller from Laguna Pueblo, speaking of the role of storytelling in tribal culture and history, says, "At Laguna (it) is a way of interacting. It isn't like there's only one storyteller designated. That's not it at all. It's a whole way of being. When I say 'storytelling,' I don't mean just sitting down and telling a once-upon-a-time kind of story. I mean a whole way of seeing yourself, the people around you, your life, the place of your life in the bigger context, not just in terms of nature and location, but in terms of what has gone on before, what's happened to other people" (Barnett and Thorson 283). Silko, in her book *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, includes a chapter titled "Language and Literature From a Pueblo Indian Perspective" in which she discusses Pueblo attitudes toward oral expression. She explains that Pueblo people regard the spoken word as a more authentic of a speaker's true feelings than written language, because written words are detached from the occasion, having been produced at a time remote from the experience. She also writes of structural and temporal aspects of the stories:

...to Pueblo and other Native American peoples, language *is* story...At Laguna Pueblo, for example, many individual words have their own stories. So when one is telling a story and one is using words to tell the story, each word that one is speaking has a story of its own, too. Often the speakers, or tellers, will go into these word stories, creating an elaborate structure of stories within

stories. This structure, which becomes very apparent in the actual telling of a story, informs contemporary Pueblo writing and storytelling as well as the traditional narratives...

Within the clans there are stories that identify the clan. One moves, then, from the idea of one's identity as a tribal person into clan identity, then to one's identity as a member of an extended family... There is no definite, preset pattern for the way one will hear the stories of one's family, but it is a very critical part of one's childhood, and the storytelling continues throughout one's life. Because storytelling lies at the heart of Pueblo culture, it is absurd to attempt to fix the stories in time... our storytelling goes on constantly. Storytelling is an ongoing process, working on many different levels (50-53).

Silko has helped to revitalize Native oral tradition and is an important interpreter of its role in contemporary Native American writing tradition. She is a unique literary and scholarly source for this unit.

Stories also are imbued with healing properties; as one critic expressed it, "Story is the pharmacopeia of all Navajo healing ceremony" (Thorson 5). Paula Gunn Allen is another esteemed contemporary Native American writer and scholar, also a member of Laguna Pueblo and a cousin of Leslie Silko. She writes, in *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Source Book*, "An apprentice medicine person becomes familiar with a number of these stories because they act as general guides to that special universe (of healing power). They enable practitioners of the sacred to recognize where they are and how to function, the entities they might encounter, their names, personalities and likely disposition toward them, the kinds of instruction they might gain from them, and how to explore the universe of power to gain greater paranormal knowledge and ability" (3). N. Scott Momaday, in his novel *House Made of Dawn*, illustrates the dynamic interplay between Navajo culture and healing by focusing the narrative around the Navajo Night Chant ceremony, a complex healing ritual which reharmonizes the patient with the world.

Teresa Pijoan, a collector of Native stories whose family ran the general store at San Juan Pueblo, in her book, *White Wolf Woman and Other Native American Transformation Myths*, says "The inevitability of transformation is a key element in these stories. The European-American tradition often fears change, hence the appeal of Peter Pan. The Native American stories accept change. The European-American listener expects the ending 'they lived happily ever after'; the Native American listener accepts 'she lived for four days with her people before she became deathly ill and died.' European-American stories often polarize good

and evil; native American stories often show the dual nature of human beings and spirits, with a good side and an evil side" (12). Pijoan explains some important differences between Native and non-Native stories: (1) Non-Native stories repeat events in cycles of three; Native stories employ four repetitions. (2) Non-Native heroes are hailed for their successes, whereas Native heroes are praised for their attempt, even if it results in failure and (3) Animals who speak in non-Native tales usually point out human inconsistencies; in Native lore, animals are seen as equals who impart valuable wisdom to humans (12).

Another prominent collector of Native stories, Richard Erdoes, notes that there are regional beliefs about the proper time and place to tell particular stories, which is sometimes related to the time of year. Some stories are reserved for winter telling only, with retribution in the form of snakebite or illness to anyone who tells the story in summer. Nighttime stories told in the daytime will make the teller go bald. In some tribes, the storyteller is forbidden to add or omit words; others allow creative modification, resulting in dozens of versions. Certain stories may be considered the property of one family, while others migrate and mutate from tribe to tribe. Erdoes also says that time and place are denoted in the "Indian Way," meaning that the story begins in such a way that events have recently occurred or are unfolding as the speaker begins, creating an immediacy that is often lacking in non-Native stories (Erdoes xx). The setting and timing of a story contribute greatly to its intended meaning. In this unit, students are expected to develop an understanding of the contextual nature of the stories, embedded as they are in the cultures in which they occur.

The storytelling traditions of Inuit and Native American folklore are central to their cultures. Leslie Silko, in her unusual book *Storyteller*, helps us understand this centrality by combining traditional stories and photographic illustrations in a sort of autobiographical assemblage through which she demonstrates embedded contexts of the oral tradition by merging past and present, personal and cultural. James Houston, an artist who lived among the Inuit for many years and was responsible for bringing worldwide attention to Inuit ivory and stone carvings, explains in his book *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller* how the stories address central issues of Inuit Culture:

Inuit myths are usually short, dramatic forms dealing with the wonders of the islands of the sea, the sky, or of birth, love old age, hunting and sharing of food, polygamy, rape, murder, incest, infanticide, death, and the dreamlike mysteries of the afterlife... Inuit have long believed that they have a close, mystical relationship with all of nature, and that the animals have the power to hear and understand the words of humans. For this reason, hunters in their camps, when singing or speaking of walrus or seal, speak softly and may carefully refer to them as maggots or lice, or call caribou lemmings, thus

soothing the animals that are the object of the hunt, those essential for Inuit survival (106).

Storytelling was a highly regarded skill among the Inuit, as there was no written form of their language until missionaries devised a writing system in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Storytellers made animal sounds, acted out scenes and enlivened the legends for an appreciative audience. Inuit tales refer to the obstacles to survival presented by the adverse environment and the harsh, haunting beauty of the landscape.

In general, Southwest Native stories are concerned with healing rituals, with the harmonization of man with the environment, with ceremonies related to successful harvests, and with shamanic rituals; Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony* tells of the healing quest of a psychologically scarred war veteran. The Pueblo peoples, such as the Hopi, Zuni, Acoma, Laguna and Rio Grande peoples emphasize agricultural myths and rituals, such as the Corn Dance. The Navajo, who are primarily shepherders, are more concerned with overall harmony and share with their Asian ancestors an emphasis on shamanic cures through ritualistic sand paintings. The Inuit, hunters and fishermen in a land distinctly unfriendly to agriculture, have formed a storytelling tradition that ritualizes the hunt and gives thanks for the life-sustaining quality of the animals' sacrifice (Leeming and Page 7-11)

In summary, the intent of this instructional unit is to explore Native and non-Native literature of these two regions of extreme climate to identify common and divergent themes and symbols specifically as they relate to the natural landscapes of the targeted regions. For example, the following may be considered: images of human and cosmic consciousness, survival, death, romance, animals, wilderness, human dwellings, cleansing and healing rituals, shamanic activities, human social organization, symbolic journeys, and offerings to gods or spirits. Students will also be asked to examine the concept of "sense of place" as it relates to the stories presented, and as it relates to their own lives and identities.

Some of the questions to be asked are: What are the most potent iconographic symbols of these cultures? What regional differences exist and how may they be connected to the landscapes? What is the meaning of wilderness and how does it shape the attitudes of the people of the regions? How does the sparsity of the landscapes affect human emotions and cultural products, such as the stories and their images, symbols and themes?

## **Implementation**

Southwest Native American and Inuit stories share many common themes. Both include *tales of animals and transformation, origin legends, trickster tales, and stories that instruct and proffer advice for living*. See the unit's Bibliography For Teachers for anthologies, many of which include informative discussions of these categories. These thematic categories provide a structured way to approach the stories in the classroom, and to organize our thinking about iconography and

symbols as they relate to the landscapes. *Representative stories from each of these four categories are included in the lesson plans.*

The selections are intended to be read aloud in class. Ideally, students should be given a copy of each reading for personal use, including notations, questions, underlining and highlighting. This is called "preparing the text" and is a graded activity, with evaluation based on a required number of responses per page, for example. Preparing the text is more focused for the students if the teacher reads the selections aloud, for several reasons. The teacher is familiar with the text and can read fluently and expressively, students report that when they read aloud their attention is diverted from preparing the text, and having the entire section read by one person is more fluid and less distracting in general.

Students participate in extended discussions and respond in writing to a variety of topics, as noted in the lesson plans. A journal is suggested for notes and responses because it allows for informal reflection and provides a record of the student's critical and creative thinking on the material of the unit.

The New Mexico content standards for Language Arts to be met in this unit are:

Students will:

- understand and use Language Arts as a learning tool.
- listen and read for a variety of purposes.
- use a variety of listening and reading strategies appropriately.
- express facts, ideas, and opinions in a variety of setting in oral and written forms.
- explain and appreciate elements of literature from diverse cultures.
- use language and literature to gain insight into their own and others' lives, and build understanding of the moral and aesthetic dimensions of human experience.

This unit is designed to take approximately nine weeks, depending on the number of reading selections chosen from the materials suggested.

Week One:

Introduce students to the concepts of ecocriticism, noting the importance of the environment as an active element in the narrative, and the concept of "sense of place." Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* offers an introduction to the basic concepts of ecocriticism (1-27) and to the importance of the sense of place (252-279). Some important ideas for discussion are

- (1) The natural environment of a story is not merely a framing device but an important presence in the narrative; human history and natural history are linked in ways that are manifest in literature. General ongoing

questions for the unit: How do the stories present the landscape? What elements are emphasized?

(2) The sense of place is composed of many factors, including a complex of cultural, familial, personal, and environmental elements. General ongoing questions: How is the author's sense of place revealed in the story? How does the sense of place affect the concept we have of our individual identity? How is it reflected in the works of art we produce?

Discuss the classroom group's sense of place, the sense of place engendered by the school, and the student's own personal sense of place. Students may produce drawings, poems, stories or other creative products to convey the meaning of the term "sense of place." It will be interesting to compare these with later products as the unit continues.

Discuss the desert and Arctic tundra environments, listing characteristics of each.

Create a brainstorming web on the board. This can also be done on a large piece of paper, which can be saved for later examination. Students will be able to see how much more they know at the end of the unit.

Week Two:

Read Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire" and Edward Abbey's essay "Down the River" from *Desert Solitaire*. These selections have been chosen because they take place in extreme environments which exert obvious influence on the narratives; they thus offer a framework for discussing the unit's key concepts: (1) environment as an active element and (2) the "sense of place" in literary works. Make sure students understand these concepts fully. Ask a volunteer to tell each story aloud in his/her own words. Have the other students write down descriptive words and phrases used and discuss how these indicate the centrality of the landscape in the story and how they convey a sense of place. Discuss whether the story could have occurred in another setting. What would be different? What would be missing?

Have students describe an extreme environment they have experienced. Discuss their selection of descriptive words and phrases. They may also reflect in writing on what a sense of place is for them, and what it might be for someone they know well, such as a grandparent.

Week Three:

Begin discussing the Native literature with transformation tales. Read the Inuit tale "Sedna the Sea Goddess," the Navajo story of "Changing Woman," the Zuni story "The Youth and His Eagle," and Rudolfo Anaya's *Maya's Children: The Story of La Llorona*. Note similarities and differences in the use of the concept of

transformation. Discuss how depictions of transformation relate to the environment in which they are produced. (Example: In the Inuit tale, Sedna's fingers are turned into animals. Most of the Inuit's body is covered constantly due to the climate. Fingers and face may be the most familiar anatomical features.) The idea is to build iconographic awareness by encouraging students to consider elements of the story in relation to the place of its origin.

#### Week Four:

Now that the students have experienced stories of both Native and non-Native origin, discuss storytelling itself: What childhood memories do they have of stories? (Each student can share this with the group.) Why do people enjoy stories? What makes a good story? A good storyteller? What knowledge do they have of specific storytelling traditions? Have two students (or more) tell the same well-known story, for example "Jack and the Beanstalk"—note the differences. Have each student bring in a favorite story from childhood and read it to the class. Who else in the class liked that story? Or didn't? Why?

Point out that storytelling is an ever-evolving process, changing with place and time. Discuss *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* as modern video stories. What elements do they have in common with traditional stories?

Invite one or more skilled storytellers to visit the class and talk about how they approach the art of storytelling, what its appeal is for them, how many stories they know, etc. Have the students ask them questions which they've prepared in advance of the visit — and impromptu questions, of course

#### Week Five:

Proceed with origin tales. What is their purpose? Why do all cultures have them?

Read the Navajo story "The Five Worlds." Talk about the use of twins and possible interpretations for that important image. Read one of the Inuit stories of how Raven created the world. Why is that particular bird chosen? Does the use of a pure black bird relate to the iconic prominence of that image in a mostly-white landscape?

Note that origin tales often include transformations. How does the concept of transformation in the stories reflect transformations that we observe in nature?

Make and post in the classroom a list or visual map of iconographic links between the stories. How do these reflect human interactions with difficult environments? How are the symbols in origin stories different from or similar to those in trickster tales or transformation tales? Emphasize comparison and analysis of the specific icons and symbols.

#### Week Six:

Read a variety of trickster tales. They are widely available, and many of them are

quite short. Raven is an important trickster in Inuit culture, and Coyote is prominent in Zuni, Hopi, and Navajo oral tradition. Discuss the characteristics of these animals. How do their traits relate to their use as tricksters? Some important questions: What do these tales make us see about ourselves? What do they teach us? Why are some of the stories so bizarre? What regional differences exist between trickster figures of the targeted regions? What are the dilemmas faced by the tricksters and how do they relate to the landscape?

Have the students act out trickster tales to emphasize the mischief and humor of these stories. Have them compose trickster tales based on contemporary themes for class presentation and analysis.

Week Seven:

### *Tales to Live By*

Instruction is an important component of these stories. Why? Is it easier to hear advice that comes to us this way? What cultural factors are at play here regarding one person's right to tell another how to behave? Note how these stories offer help with decision-making.

Compare this genre of stories to "old wives tales" and proverbs in the dominant culture. Analyze the differences and similarities with respect to the messages presented and the effectiveness of their presentation.

Readings: Leslie Marmon Silko's chapter "Landscape, History and the Pueblo Imagination," from John Elder's book *Tales to Live By*. The Navajo story "Deeds of the Twins," the Tewa tale "Water Jar Boy."

Discuss with the students how our fairy tales are similarly instructive—"Little Red Riding Hood," "Goldilocks," etc.

Week Eight:

Discuss how the stories have changed in content, theme, and symbols by reading contemporary stories such as Silko's "Tony's Story," about an incident in Grants, New Mexico, in the 1950's in which two Acoma natives were shot after trying to buy alcohol, and Lucy Tapahanso's "The Snakeman," about the experience of being in a Navajo boarding school near Gallup, New Mexico, in the 1970's. Paula Gunn Allen's *Song of the Turtle* contains these and other stories, and includes an informative essay in the introduction to the text.

Discuss the folkloric elements that persist from older to newer stories. Compare contemporary Native writings with those of Edward Abbey. What concerns are common and universal? What does the environment have to do with this? Are there evident differences in the sense of place of contemporary authors compared to the sense of place of traditional storytellers? Discuss the impact of dominant culture on contemporary Native stories. What effects does dominant culture have on the sense

of place of students in the class?

Week Nine:

Discuss the merits and faults of ecocriticism. What insights have students gained from contemplation of landscape as an active element in the stories and the emphasis on the importance of the sense of place as revealed in the stories? Students may reflect on these issues in a journal after general class discussion. In what ways does ecocriticism present a viable, innovative approach to literature? What are some of its weaknesses?

Work on final student products, with presentations and evaluations. Compare student products from Week One with final products.

Using student-generated products that have accumulated throughout the unit, formulate conclusive analytical comments on the stories, themes, and symbols. Students may write journal entries to summarize key points and bring a sense of synthesis to their explorations.

## Notes

(1) These questions, derived from Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination*, were posed by Gary Harrison, Ph.D., instructor for the ATI 2000 course "Literature and the Environment," in his presentation of Buell's book.

Bibliography for Teachers \*denotes Works Cited

\*Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. NY:Ballantine, 1971.

Collection of essays from Abbey's stint as a Park Ranger in the Southwest. Brash, amusing, thought-provoking, insightful, Abbey raises important environmental issues.

\*Allen, Paula Gunn. *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

Selection of twenty-one North American Native stories which have been central to the author's spiritual development as a Native Pueblo woman. Retold by the author under the categories "Cosmogyny: The Goddesses." "Ritual Magic and Aspects of the Goddesses," and "Myth, Magic and Medicine in the Modern World."

--ed., *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*. NY: Modern Language Association, 1983.

Describes college-level lesson plans.

--ed., *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Collection of essays on the role of women in creating Native American rituals and traditions.

-- ed., *Song of the Turtle: American Indian Literature 1974-1994*. NY: Ballantine

Books, 1996.

These stories reveal the continuing presence of Native myths and rituals in the minds of contemporary writers.

--ed., *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*. NY: Modern Language Association, 1993.

College-level course designs with extensive listing of Works Cited.

Austin, Mary. *The Land of Little Rain*. NY: Penguin, 1997.

An early (1930's) description of the desert ecosystem by an articulate and sensitive female nature writer; interesting to compare to Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*.

Balzar, John. *Yukon Alone: The World's Toughest Adventure Race*. NY: Henry Holt and Co., 1999.

Informative, recent account of sled-dog racing and its origins.

\*Barnett, Louise K. and James L. Thorson, eds. *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Albuquerque: UNM Press, 1999. Contemporary scholarly writings on Silko's fiction and non-fiction, including *Ceremony* and *Storyteller*.

Basso, Keith H. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996.

Contains an excellent explanation of the concept of "sense of place" as it relates to Native literature, focusing on the significance of places in the Apache ethos. Includes stories about how ancestors named places in the community of Cibecue on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, as told to the author by a Native commentator.

Blackman, Margaret B. *Sadie Brower Neakok, An Inupiaq Woman*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989.

Sadie Neacock was born to an Inupiaq mother and a white father in 1916 in northernmost Alaska. She and her nine brothers and sisters were raised with a mixture of the two cultures. This is a rather sanitized version of her life, with interesting everyday facts presented in a straightforward, living-history style.

\*Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1995.

Scholarly presentation of the ideas underlying ecocriticism.

Caduto, Michael J. *Teachers Guide to Keepers of the Earth*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1988.

Provides interesting background information on the major Native American groups of North America and supplementary text and reading lists by chapter to complement *Keepers of the Earth*.

Elder, John and Hertha D. Wong, Eds., *Family of Earth and Sky: Indigenous Tales of Nature From Around the World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Stories are presented under the categories used in this unit, Origins, Animal Tales, and Transformations, Tricksters, and Tales to Live By. Includes an informed discussion of storytelling in the introduction.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays*. Ed. Larzer Ziff. NY: Penguin, 1982.

\*Erdoes, Richard and Alfonso Ortiz, Eds. *American Indian Trickster Tales*. NY: Viking, 1998.

Large collection of coyote and other trickster tales with an Appendix containing information on each of the tribes represented.

\*Graulich, Melody, Ed. *Yellow Woman: Leslie Marmon Silko*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Volume in a series called *Women Writers: Texts and Contexts*. Essays by Paula Gunn Allen and others, including an interview with Silko in which she discusses her books *Storyteller*, *Ceremony*, and *Almanac of the Dead*.

\*Houston, James A. *Confessions of An Igloo Dweller*. NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

Tells of his life among the Inuit in 1948-62. Many interesting anecdotes about the collision of Inuit culture with encroaching technology and other outside influences.

Jaskoski, Helen. *Leslie Marmon Silko: A Study of the Short Fiction*. NY: Twayne Publishers, 1998.

Includes interesting biographical information, an interview with Silko, and critical responses to her writing.

\*Leeming, David and Jake Page. *The Mythology of Native North America*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998.

Informed narrative on myths and storytelling of the major Native groups of the continent, including Inuit. Discussion of the myths by theme.

Lopez, Barry. *\*Arctic Dreams*. NY: Charles Scribner, 1986.

Observations of a dedicated nature writer; presents many facts about Arctic flora and fauna, animal migration, ecology, archaeology and anthropology.

--\**Desert Notes*. NY: Avon Books, 1981.

A series of short, perceptive essays, including historical anecdotes and evocative descriptions of the desert.

Lowenstein, Tom. *Ancient Land: Sacred Whale: The Inuit Hunt and its Rituals*. London: Bloomsbury, 1993.

Tell the history of whale hunting and the myths and rituals that surround it.

Moody, Joseph P. *Medicine Man to the Inuit: A Young Doctor's Adventures Among the Eskimos*. Denver: Arctic Memories Press, 1995.

Entertaining account of a Canadian physician in the Arctic in the 1940's and 1950's. Spawned a CBS film, *Arctic Doctor*.

\* Pijoan, Teresa. *White Wolf Woman and Other Native American Transformation Myths*. Little Rock: August House, 1992.

--*Healers on the Mountain*. Little Rock: August House, 1993.

A collection of stories on spiritual harmony and healing from various Native peoples, including Pueblo, Inuit, Navajo and others; subjects include dreams, chants and vision quests. Contains brief explanations, dozens of stories.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. \**Ceremony*. NY: Penguin, 1986.

Highly recommended. Fictional account of a Laguna Pueblo native who returns from World War II alienated and searching for resolution of inner conflicts, which leads him to his Indian past. Silko is a native of Laguna Pueblo.

--\* *Storyteller*. NY: Seaver Books, 1981.

A unique compendium of family photographs and Laguna stories intended to convey the personal meaning storytelling has for Silko.

--\**Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

A collection of essays in which Silko contrasts Pueblo philosophy with dominant Anglo culture.

Suzuki, David and Peter Knudtson. *Wisdom of the Elders*. NY: Bantam Books, 1992.

Two biologists discuss Native literature in relation to sacred connections to the land, clustered around the modern Western themes of ecology, biology and evolution.

Underhill, Ruth. *Life in the Pueblos*. Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1991.

Readable account of daily living among Pueblo peoples.

\*Van Dyke, John C. *The Desert*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1980.

Reprint of the 1901 edition. Van Dyke, an art historian and critic, spent three years wandering on horseback through the Colorado, Mojave and Sonoran deserts. One of the first writers to convey the unique beauty of the southwest desert, he applies his considerable powers of perception to this poetic account of his journey.

VanEtten, Teresa. *Ways of Indian Wisdom*. Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 1987.

Twenty Pueblo Indian stories translated from the Tewa language. VanEtten's family owned a trading post at San Juan Pueblo in Northern New Mexico.

Wenzel, George. *Animal Rights, Human Rights: Ecology, Economy and Ideology in the Canadian Arctic*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press., 1991.

An Inuit anthropologist explores the campaign to ban seal hunting and its effect on the Inuits socially, culturally and economically. Clear, reasoned, informative.

Wilder, Edna. *Once Upon an Eskimo Time*. Portland, OR: Alaska Northwest Books, 1986.

Entertaining and culturally informative portrait of an Inuit woman called

Nederhook who reputedly lived to be 121 years old (1858-1979). Written by her daughter. Includes stories, embedded in the text.

Williams, Terry Tempest. *Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1984.

Author is a Utah native who discusses Navajo storytelling, natural history, and ecology with personal anecdotes.

Bibliography for Students: \*denotes Works Cited

Anaya, Rudolfo. *\*Maya's Children: The Story of La Llorona*. NY: Hyperion Books, 1997.

Retelling of the story of La Llorona, the crying woman who searches for her children. Created for young children, but suitable for all ages. Beautifully illustrated.

--and Antonio Marquez, eds. *Cuentos Chicanos*. Revised Edition. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993.

Stories by well-known and emerging writers; folkloric to worldly themes. Several stories are in Spanish.

\*Bonvillain, Nancy. *The Inuit*. Frank W. Porter III, General Editor. NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1995

From the series *Indians of North America*. Includes history, traditions, religion. Middle school and above.

Finley, Carol. *Art of the Far North: Inuit Sculpture, Drawing, and Printmaking*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Co., 1998.

Contains a brief history of the Inuits and simple explanations of cultural elements such as shamans and storytelling. Middle school and above.

\*London, Jack. "To Build A Fire." *The Best Short Stories of Jack London*. Ed. Eugene Burdick. NY: Fawcett, 1962, 13-28.

Story of a lone man who perishes in the Arctic cold because he underestimates the precariousness of his circumstances.

Metayer, Maurice, Ed. *Tales from the Igloo*. Edmonton, Alberta: Hurtig Publishers, 1972.

Twenty-two stories collected and translated by the author. With superb illustrations by an Inuit graphic artist.

Oliver, Ethel Ross. *Favorite Eskimo Tales Retold*. Anchorage: Alaska Pacific University Press, 1992.

Good selection of short and simply told stories about animals, creation myths and tales to live by. The author was married to an Aleut and collected the stories over a period from the 1920's to the 1950's.

Oman, Lela Kiana. *The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told by My*

*People*. Ontario: Carleton University Press, 1995.

Inupiaq version of Adam and Eve, recorded by the author as it was told to her when she worked in an Alaskan mining camp. Delicately illustrated, and it could be excerpted easily.

Steltzer, Ulli. *Building an Igloo*. NY: Henry Holt & Co., 1995.

Children's book. Great photos by the author of the step-by-step building of an igloo by Inuits, with simple but good explanation of how the blocks are cut and fitted together.