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Recovering the Urban Watershed:

An Exercise in Student-Centered, Community-Based Publication

"Whether individual or social, being doesn't stop at the skin." ~ Lawrence Buell

Michelle Sonnenberg, *USF St. Petersburg*

Salt Creek's mouth sits on the south side of Bayboro Harbor, a dredged port on Tampa Bay, just south of downtown St. Petersburg, Florida. You can easily access Salt Creek from the University of South Florida St. Petersburg's (USFSP) campus. The put in for kayaks and canoes is at Campus Recreation. As you navigate past floating docks and a narrow spit of land, you can see sailboat masts jutting up into a sky of rising cumulus clouds. Now paddle across the harbor and into the flow of the creek. At first, it's wide with hard edges. Shipyards and marinas remove the illusion of a bank or shoreline. Salt Creek is a working creek – a creek that was once a salt marsh, a place where edge was ever changing.



Photo Credit: Wendy Joan Biddlecomb

Dredging by the city in the early 20th century created an industrial backdoor for St. Petersburg, changing this stream from part of a shifting wetland to a fixed mark. It also has had a lingering effect on south side communities, which are predominately African American. Salt Creek's channelization helped bring on the creation of a "black bottom" (Spirn 403), a low lying impoverished area that is at the bottom "economically, socially, and topographically" (Spirn 403) because of questionable choices in land development and urban planning. The decimation of the salt marsh that served as a sponge during times of heavy rain and high water has led to environmental and social inequality in this watershed. Yet, the creek functions. The hum of power tools and noxious odors

from industrial grade chemicals used to restore and build boats dance around pilings where pelicans linger. The smells of old wood saturated in fry grease and beer stains waft over the water from underneath the canopy at Fish Tales, a local bar and eatery.

Move further up the creek and enter into a mangrove lined channel that offers shelter from the traffic and commotion on dry ground. Pass under the bridge for Thrill Hill – a local landmark – and continue to the Fourth Street Bridge. Here, lean back level with the kayak to gain clearance. Rumor has it that this is one place the Big Ole Gator resides. Push past, and be rewarded with a twisted tunnel of black mangroves that opens up onto Bartlett Pond. Here, sheltered from the noise of cars, nature feels unbounded but dirty. Trash floats on the surface of the water. Homeless people make their beds in the recesses of the tree canopy.

Paddle on to the southern tip of Bartlett Pond. Here the mangroves become too dense for you to pass, but the creek does continue, channelized and dammed, until it meets Lake Maggiore. If you follow an almost straight line along the west end of the lake, another creek flows toward 22nd Avenue South to Clam Bayou, skirting a mulch processing facility on the lake's edge and flowing by a golf course – a major source of nitrates in the watershed. Kayaking this channel is close to

impossible. Portages over the interstate and past Skyline Chili are required. Honestly, most don't make it past the chili.

The trip reveals how a peninsula once bounded by flowing water has become overdeveloped and fragmented, much like our national identity. The loss of community through suburban sprawl and bombastic urban growth leads to an ethical fracture and a disconnection from nature. It also shows how wildness grows through concrete laden spaces. It exposes Florida -- skulking gators, pickerel weed sheltering common gallinule and herons, and limpkins beak deep in apple snail shells. It is a wildness that we easily overlook driving back and forth on pavement during our daily routines. It is a wildness that is part of the vitality of our nation, and it is part of our identity whether we see it or not. Our goal, as student authors and community writers, has been to seek out these edges and describe them. *Salt Creek Journal* revealed to us that the typographies are boundless.

Creeks, Ditches, and Drainpipes--a shared literacy of a diverted national identity



Photo Credit: Christopher Campbell

Salt Creek Journal brings together writing and images centered on this urban creek and its watershed. The book uses local realities to carry readers to bigger ideas about place, community, nature, and learning. Hannah Gorski, Dr. Thomas Hallock, Alison Hardage, and I worked with student and community writers to chisel away at the perceived separation of people from the wildness inherent in physical spaces they inhabit. We worked to facilitate the communication of individual and communal identities at the watershed level to draw out urban ecologies of place. We accomplished this through new forms of American nature writing – forms not confined to the search for solitude and solace in the pastoral. The goal of this project has been to strengthen our fundamental understanding of the human-environment connection while developing both personal and community

awareness of place and purpose through exploring nature in an urban setting. It is a non-pious approach to discovering wildness in the places where we live out the motions of our daily lives. It begs us to ask, *what does nature look like where we are, and why does it look that way?*

Salt Creek is raggedy, appropriated, and often overlooked – like most urban creeks. *Salt Creek Journal* follows its flow, collecting varied narratives that center on this particular watershed. The book pivots on the notion of landscape literacy, a concept defined by Anne Whiston Spirn. She uses this term “[to mean] the mutual shaping of people and place -- to encompass both the population of a place and its physical features: its topography, water flow and plant life; its infrastructure of streets and sewers; its land uses, buildings and open spaces” (Spirn 397). This definition opens up the possibility of a type of literacy that is inclusive and holistic specifically because it does not allow for the idea that people are separate from nature. Spirn explored this concept in West Philadelphia. We have carried her idea to the core of *Salt Creek Journal*: urban ecologies contain the pulsing heart of nature and people in the veins of waterways. We look to the low places to see flows and stagnation, ripples, and resistance.

The book itself is a collection of student writing, along with the writing of scholars,

poets, professors, and professionals that are both locally and nationally known. It touches on many different relationships within a community, revealing varied typographies of place. Pieces cover mansplaining, environmental justice, humor, queer community, race relations, and family. Each provides a way for people to get over fears of the natural environment and of difference. The book seeks to demystify a ditch. It helps us look to the place our refuse runs loose.

The vision for *Salt Creek Journal* stems from an ongoing interdisciplinary trend in Environmental Studies to bridge the perceived pastoral divide that separates people from nature. Seeking out green spaces in urban places and writing about the discoveries made there creates positive socio-emotional connections with the physical world (Carrus, et. al. 154; Bazerman, 37). Teaching nature writing as part and reflection of urban form creates environmental connection and builds community awareness. Since the early 90's, there has been a growing trend toward interdisciplinarity in the study of literature and environment that has moved in step with the second wave of Ecocriticism. This trend was alive and well at this year's ASLE conference in Detroit, Michigan, where new urban imaginaries are showing the way toward future possibilities in urban regeneration. This trend, coupled with our desire as a

student collective to put forth a work that represents our unique community, and Spirn's experiences with the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, served as the divining rod that directed us through this process. We utilized friendsofsaltcreek.org, a website that serves as a repository for narratives and historical information gathered by USFSP students, as well as various local archives to access primary and secondary resources. The stories that arise from this rill and its watershed tell us the history of the industrial back door of St. Petersburg. We see firsthand the physical degradation of the landscape. We see the people who live and have lived on the troubled landscape. This ragged, industrial vision shatters our pastoral tropes of untouched wilderness and shows us the ways in which we have historically distanced ourselves from wildness around us. This project connects us to how this detachment has happened in our local landscape.

Similarly, in West Philadelphia, Spirn sought to reveal the failure of urban planners, developers, and officials over the course of centuries in the Mill Creek neighborhood to realize and incorporate into their design the necessity of the millstream's flow on the land. Stakeholders chose, rather, to subsume it. Creeks on the landscape are sculptors, responsible for carving and etching,

transport and drainage. Once, we followed their paths as a way to purpose them. We over-purpose. We dominate. In West Philadelphia, the only visible remnants of the creek are the empty lots and abandoned housing undermined by the creek's subterranean flow. In the Marina district of St. Petersburg and through Harbordale, Salt Creek runs both above and below ground. Her wounds are a bit different, but they offer up a similar reverberation of a broken, flowing echo rooted in poor, unequal urban planning.

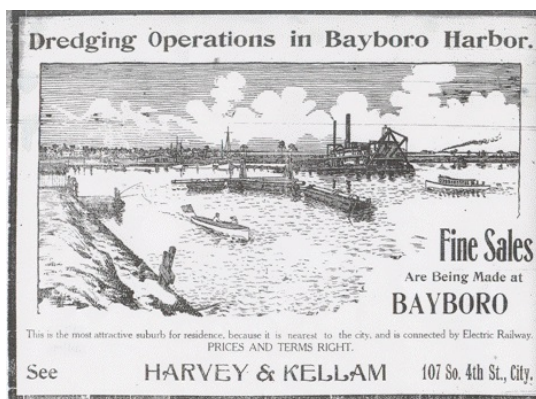


Photo Credit: St. Petersburg Museum of History

Spirn worked with a team of graduate students and middle school educators to connect the Mill Creek community to the reality of their landscape. This was one piece of a larger effort to incorporate a bottom-up/top-down approach to green urban planning in a depressed watershed. She did this through creating a place-based educational program for local middle schoolers in West Philadelphia.

These middle schoolers lived in the Mill Creek watershed. They carried the weight

of the failure of their landscape as if it were something they created, but it was not. Her program taught them to read the landscape by using tactile experience and primary resources to identify the true causes of failure in their community. They saw maps from an atlas that showed Mill Creek alive on the land. They went outside and walked in search of a hidden stream. Their clues for finding it were “slumping sidewalks, cracks in walls, manhole covers” (Spirn 404). They pored over documents from two hundred plus years of poor planning and urban design that ignored the natural environment at the expense of its inhabitants.

Walking in St. Petersburg with the goal of viewing Salt Creek cannot reproduce the Spirn's description of a colonial, urban, coastal watershed. But the walk does echo signs of environmental and social injustice. As with Mill Creek, the history of Salt Creek can be traced through old maps and newspaper articles. Some of these articles are incorporated in *Salt Creek Journal*. The cover of the book, designed by USFSP graduate Scarlett Schiraldi, is an image of a map of St. Petersburg rendered by John Nolen in 1924. John Nolen was a landscape architect that designed a plan for the City of St. Petersburg at peak influence of Garden Cities in America. Although Nolen's design did not follow the traditional layout of a garden city, it did

allow for flows that maintained the natural state of the southern Pinellas peninsula.

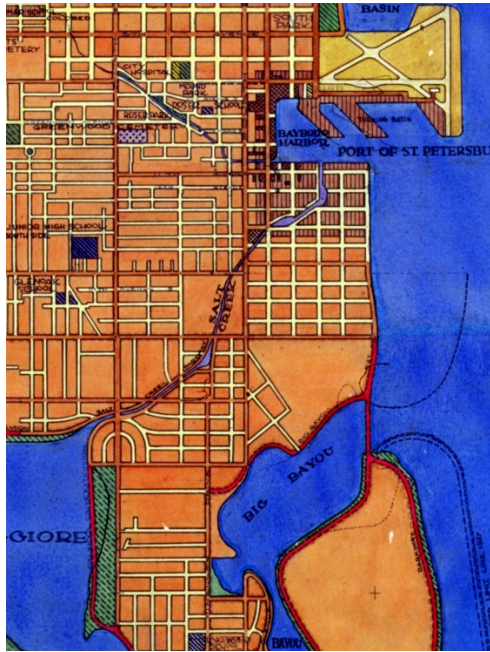


Photo Credit: John Nolen Map, City of St. Petersburg

The city rejected the plan. The dredging of Bayboro Harbor and the straightening of Salt Creek began around the same time. Nolen noted that "It has been said and with reason, that man is the only animal who desecrates the surroundings of his own habitation." Nolan was ahead of his time. We recognize now that urbanization that takes into consideration the function of the landscape can protect both people and place from natural ecological stressors. This is part of the ethic at the heart of New Urbanism (Stephenson 99), a movement St. Petersburg would do well to abide by. More often than not, city planners and government officials choose the cheapest short-term path over the

more cost effective long-term direction when developing an urban space. Seldom do they consider the function of a watershed. In the city's defense, many of the green spaces Nolen wanted to protect remain preserved. Boyd Hill and the land surrounding Lake Maggiore are examples of this.

The goal remains to get students to encounter and embrace wildness in place, to create within them a sense of landscape literacy. Green spaces integrated in urban form help facilitate this type of understanding. Shaping a place-based identity grounded in the reality of history and political decision making, as Spirn did, frees people of unnecessary attachments to unhealthy relationships with nature. Once this pattern of learning is established, they will carry it to future destinations. "A mosaic of places influence people over the course of a lifetime," (Devine-Wright 165) and these skills, once learned, open human perception to include urban wildness as a part of their identity. Exploring nature writing while tangled up in the urban wilds of a Pinellas County concrete jungle breaks students from stale tropes and repetitive motifs of beauty. Students traditionally slip easily into piety. To fend off this approach, one of the first tasks of the course is to paddle up Salt Creek – the polluted, almost imperceptible slit of a waterway they look across to daily from

their classrooms. Our book starts at this confluence, where the creek and the bay intermingle. It then follows the stream as it braids its way through the landscape, offering up experiences both old and new. *Salt Creek Journal* shares the history and feel of a place we tend to ignore.

What can we learn from this? One, a person has to venture outside in order to connect with the natural world. Two, everyone needs an educated tour guide. Three, these experiences should be recorded. This effort may entail ethnography, sketching, journaling, or writing a song. This may turn into community educational projects, environmental stewardship, and urban renewal. The possible outcomes are truly boundless. Geologists do field work. Why shouldn't literature students (Crimmel 5) and community members? After all, the world is our subject.

Student-Centered, Community-Based Writing and Publication

A nature writing course is, at the very least, an English course. At the most, it's a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the value of both text and place, intertwined and generative. *Salt Creek Journal* created an avenue by which word and world could merge within a community of authors. Work began in the classroom.

The writings assigned to students were part of a three tiered process: reading, experiencing the outside, and writing. Classroom readings were spread across genres. Fiction, non-fiction, and poetry accompanied literary theory and philosophical critiques on the creation and appropriation of space and place. Students were introduced to the idea that physical hegemonic discourse is writ large on the landscape. They explored texts that showed the struggle for environmental justice, such as Natasha Trethewey's *Beyond Katrina*, where students were faced with another "black bottom," and the generational pull of poverty and addiction in coastal Louisiana and Mississippi. Lastly, the classes went on excursions designed to connect the student as learner, doer, and creator on his or her landscape.

The writings themselves were tiered, with the first designed to help the writer bring to fruition an understanding of a particular place through a verbal rendering. The second focused on explaining a theoretical concept from class readings through an outdoor experience. The last writing asked the student to combine these two approaches when looking specifically at Salt Creek. This cumulative tack created the necessary mental space to explore large concepts of place, appropriation, nature, tropes, and wilderness on an urban scale.

The call for submissions was made to students and local authors who live in the Salt Creek area. Gorski, Hardage, and I served as editors. Our job was to go over all submissions, work with chosen authors to produce final copy, select historical materials such as photos and maps for the book, and promote the final product. We created a timeline for the history of Salt Creek, aligning newspaper articles and city documents to mark the various transitions and events the creek has experienced. We took the submissions and ordered them in the book according to the physical location of the narrative within the watershed. An on campus graphic designer was chosen to lay out the book. A community based publishing house was created, "The Tampa Bay Writer's Network." The book is due out in January 2018, and there are plans to use it as curriculum in area middle and high schools.

These overarching steps made the book possible, but the real work and growth came from individual students who learned to push through the drafting process. Again, as with all experiential learning, personal and academic growth surpass discipline-based limitations. Henry David Thoreau left Concord for the woods around Walden Pond, but he could hear the train pass on its tracks from the seeming seclusion of his cabin. Zonker and Bernard considered running a garden

hose from the house to resurrect their beloved Walden Puddle, symbol of their communal life, in Doonesbury. Everyone loves the sound of a train in the distance, and we all seek to restore what we perceive as lost. But is this the way to find wildness around us?

We move from the individual, to the communal, and out to broader landscapes in the process of attaching to a place. Rather than creating "archetypal elements and racializing memories of specific ecological settings", humans tend to organize spatial experiences and recognize patterns that become assembled in a "larger landscape experience" (Riley 15). This type of growth becomes apparent when watching the evolution of a student writer.

Resie Waechter, an undergraduate student at USFSP-- and now a professional writer on the scene in St. Petersburg -- found her voice by shedding clichés and connecting to personal experience when writing about Salt Creek. She didn't get what she signed up for when taking nature writing. She expected idyllic jaunts into the great outdoors. She expected the pastoral escape motif to be alive and encouraged in the classroom. College students in general assume a Nature Writing course will deliver this traditional paradox. They seek the familiar dualistic relationship between person and nature. What Resie found was a deeper

connection to her internal and external environments, as well as a flourishing ability to write effectively.

Trash was the first thing she noticed – visible, material pollution on the landscape. Before she set paper to pen, she paddled; as she did, bottles bobbed up and down in the water. Doritos bags floated by. Beer cans thinned in the muck, their sheen blistered by the sun. Trash on land, in the creek, trash tangled in the mangroves. She was told to leave it, to take it for what it is. This baffled her. It was a trigger.



Photo Credit: Hannah Gorski

She began her first draft rambling. Personal disclosure, student anxiety, and an instant connection to a mission trip to Guatemala, the first place she came face to face with waste in all the wrong places, set her off on a course to reconcile her ideals of the physical world and people with the realities of living. She struggled to come to terms with a piece by Jenny Price, [“13 Ways of Looking at Nature in L.A.”](#) because concrete and industry are

not beautiful. Nature is beautiful, and there is no nature in L.A. This was the theory at the center of Resie’s work; it began to wake her up. Was there nature in south St. Pete? Wasn’t this, too, nature?

It is not surprising that a woman who went on a mission trip to Guatemala would struggle with ways to make a difference in her community. She focused on this struggle in her second draft, and with the seeming absurdity of her professor’s command to “leave the trash alone.” In this version, Price’s theory became embedded rather than overtly stated in her writing, and she discovered the word at the heart of her piece: “coiffed.” If nature appears to be styled and arranged, as the word coiffed suggests, how can it also be untouched? The immaterial ideas of what nature should be solidified, and she came to see the unrealistic ideals she was imprinting on the natural world.

She used this term to explore her relationship with nature, people, and her writing. Armed with Roy Peter Clark’s *Writing Tools*, she carefully placed her subjects and verbs at the beginning of her sentences. Her first draft began in the passive voice, and her final copy began with an audible demand, “Do not pick up any of the trash.” Resie learned to shift directly into the action of her writing. She took control of it.

She varied her sentence length. She mastered the power of the one-word sentence with her application of “coiffed.” She began to climb up and down the ladder of abstraction, and this is where her connection to wildness shone through. Resie had gone to Guatemala to build cook-stoves for indigenous people. She was shocked by the trash that was piled up in their living spaces. She felt the need to rescue them, but they did not want to be saved. Coiffed is not simply a term applied to trash in her piece. It is a thread that connects a pattern of thinking emergent on the landscape. It connected her directly to the conflict over conservation and preservation, post-colonial ideals, and imperialism. She moved from an individual sense of place to a pastiche of understanding, building internal and external senses of community.

At home, on Salt Creek, she came to understand two things from her experiences outside and her process of writing. One, trash is everywhere. Some groups within societies are better at hiding it than others, but it still lurks. Picking it up doesn't really solve the problem so much as it fills our need to feel helpful. This gives us the second lesson; that sometimes, what we think is help is actually the misguided expectation that others should be like us. They should accept our same definition of nature.

Resie learned to face this fallacy. She gained a strengthened sense of place within her community. Writing helped to carry her there.

Writing as Community Landscape

There are those who live with their trash hidden and those who sleep on their trash at night. Often, these two groups inhabit the same space or edge up against one another, with the latter group being less visible. This is just one of the many threads of discovery to come out of *Salt Creek Journal*. The book illustrates the various ways people connect with place and how that shapes their identity. These various ecologies are the foundation of community. John Tallmadge tells us that “everything starts with...transformative encounters with nature, which, over time, develop into a sense of ecological identity, the personal stories that define who you are with respect to the natural world. Identity implies values, and values invite affirming experiences and actions” (3). The hope for *Salt Creek Journal* is that it is replicated, adapted, and applied as a classroom tool. Just as with Spirn, we need to look to primary sources that tell us the narratives of our landscapes. Nature writing and ecocriticism rely on grand narratives (Garrard 13), but stories that make the appropriation of nature and wild spaces personal affect change. Let us seek them out and share them.

If we take praxis to mean action that is thoughtful and thought that is active (Morton 9), then the sensibility of student-centered, community-based publication is self-evident. Education grows compassion through awareness and action. *Salt Creek Journal* delivers this. Renewal comes on the landscape as well as through the landscape. It is shaped by community, narratives, political struggle, and a respect for the physical world. Landscape literacy teaches us that natural and built environments have been enmeshed for a long time. We see this through Spirn's work in West Philadelphia, in Price's hunt for nature in the heart of L.A., and in

Waechter's reconciliation of ideals to reality. Learning to recognize our place in these hybrid landscapes permits us to move beyond overwrought tropes of pristine nature into the wildness inherent in all things. Place attachment implies adaptation (Buell 66). It shows that the individual is connected to a larger whole. Students who write about their interactions with the physical world gain a sense of connection to place. They also earn a shared identity with communities who come together to publish about the many constructs that interact in a single, highly local watershed.

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