

# STORIES OF PLACE: WRITING AND THE NATURAL WORLD

## SESSION THREE—DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following are the discussion questions used for this session:

1) Even though the author of a literary journalism article is not writing about themselves, the author's personality and point of view shine through more than in a typical news article. Pick one of the pieces of literary journalism in this section (all the readings other than "What's Left Behind" include outside research and could be considered literary journalism, but "Disposable America", "Waste Land, Promised Land", and "This Once-Proud Land Was Mayan" most closely fit the conventions of the genre—please select one of these three).

To what degree were you able to get to know the author's personality, even though they weren't writing a personal essay? How do you think they feel about the subject they were writing about, and what are some examples of moments when they shared those feelings, either explicitly or implicitly?

2) The six readings in this section represent a wide range of options creative nonfiction writers have for including themselves in their essays. Different authors make different decisions about both how much they want to include themselves, and in what way they include themselves. Some include themselves as a character in scene, others make little to no mention of themselves in the first person ("I") and present their point of view much more subtly.

Select one of our readings. Where does the author fall on this spectrum? Why do you think they chose the level of personal inclusion they did, and what impact does this have on the essay?

3) Creative nonfiction incorporates some of the literary tools of fiction writing. One such tool is treating real people as characters by putting them 'in scene' and incorporating dialogue. Unlike a news article, where any quoted material is expected to be a literal record of the exact words said, there is more leeway when it comes to creative nonfiction, and while there is still an expectation of truthfulness, it is understood that the writer generally isn't transcribing dialogue verbatim—they are expected to inject their own perspective.

In "Waste Land, Promised Land", Meyer takes this creative license a step further (see paragraph 10), and includes an imagining about what Constant and his daughter are each thinking about at that moment in time. How do you feel about a nonfiction writer using this level of creative license? There is no right or wrong answer here, by the way, and what Meyer is doing is in no way unethical—her level of interpretation is actually quite mild compared to some other nonfiction writers—but every nonfiction writer must decide for themselves how much they are willing to manipulate facts to arrive at the truth. Where do you fall on this spectrum?

4) "Back to the Land" by Chelsea Biondolillo is an example of "flash", or very brief, nonfiction. This short essay clocks in at fewer than 700 words, but the subject matter (Texas State University's research into human decomposition) is extremely rich terrain, and Biondolillo certainly had enough material for a much longer essay.

What is gained by restricting the essay to such a short length? Why do you think Biondolillo made this creative choice?