

INTRODUCTION

SHADES OF GREEN

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In the months following the April 20, 2010, explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig off the coast of Louisiana, an estimated 200 million gallons of crude oil gushed into the Gulf of Mexico, ravaging delicate wetland and ocean ecosystems and the birds, sea turtles, dolphins, whales, shrimp, and fish (to name only a few threatened species) that inhabit them.

No one yet knows the long term affects of this disaster. Although the well was capped and the oil flow staunched in mid-July, and relief wells that would provide a permanent solution to the leak were near completion, coastal regions will be forced to deal with the effects of the disaster for decades, perhaps even lifetimes. “Every oil spill is different,” *The New York Times* reported on July 18, “but the thread that unites [them] ... is a growing scientific awareness of the persistent damage that spills can do—and of just how long oil can linger in the environment,



A mock cemetery built by residents of Grand Isle, Louisiana, in June 2010 mourns the losses caused by the BP oil spill. “Everything is dying,” one Louisianan said at a town hall meeting in Plaquemines Parish, and that feeling was common as BP, the federal government, and others tried to stop the massive flow of oil into the Gulf. That finally happened in late July, but the extent of the damage to the area remains unknown. (Photo by Getty Images.) Used with permission.

hidden in out-of-the-way spots.” How many years might it take for populations of birds and fish to recover to normal levels? Which species might be pushed past the brink? How long before the spawning grounds of shrimp and crabs recover? When will the fisheries, closed because their waters were contaminated with poisonous sludge, re-open and sustain the livelihoods of the coastal communities that built them?

Another frightening possibility is that the disaster may have opened the Gulf coast to future destruction: As the marshlands now soaked with oil slowly die, the physical barrier that slows the force of fierce hurricanes erodes, and the coastline becomes even more susceptible to damage from storms.

Clearly, there is no upside to devastation this profound, but if the BP oil disaster has shown us anything, it is that our seemingly boundless reliance on fossil fuels—and our drive to extract them from the planet’s depths—is one of the most dangerous threats to the natural world. The Gulf disaster is just one powerful example of this disturbing truth, especially in the United States, where many of us enjoy lifestyles of relative comfort and convenience, often at the cost of our natural surroundings. According to *National Geographic’s* third annual “Greendex,” a comprehensive study of the per capita environmental impact of 17 countries, Americans have the largest so-called “carbon footprints.” From our love of plastic water bottles to SUVs and plasma screen TVs, our patterns of energy consumption are the least sustainable in the world.

Although experts may debate the best way to address the threats to our environment, most agree that the situation is dire and that we cannot maintain our present course. Against this backdrop, *Green* provides a path through the myriad perspectives on environmental issues. Rooted in philosophy, science, politics, history, pop culture, and personal experience, the texts collected in the pages that follow consider the environmental crises we face and argue about how and why we should try to do something to protect the planet—and ourselves. *Green* is by no means comprehensive—no single volume could hope to be—but we have put together a selection of interesting, creative, and sometimes unconventional readings and images that we believe will help you engage with environmental issues in informed and strategic ways.

We have included lyrics and poetry, memoirs and other personal writing; an excerpt from a graphic novel and other visual texts; researched arguments, guides, magazine and newspaper pieces, and book chapters. Each of these selections

stands on its own as a significant contribution to the public discourse about the environment, and taken together they create a narrative—a complicated story about America’s relationship to, appropriation of, and identification with nature. You may be familiar with some of the plotlines of this story, but the ending remains unclear.

In addition to written and visual texts, *Green* includes research, invention, and composing prompts that will help you add your voice to the ongoing conversations about the environment. As you read the selections and work through the corresponding prompts, we hope you will keep an eye trained beyond the page. Indeed, many of the prompts will allow you to link up, not only with your classmates, but also with multi-genre texts and ongoing environmental projects. And you’ll be doing more than writing here: Prompts and other assignments in the book will encourage you to explore various modes of communication—by asking you to design a website, for example; to produce videos, posters, and presentations; to conduct primary and secondary research; and to develop projects with community partners that might incorporate any number of these skills.

One of the things we hope you’ll begin to see as you move through the book is how profoundly connected American identity and identities are to the environment. The problem, of course, is that for much of our history, these identities have been rooted in a sense of appropriation. The Europeans who first settled along the Atlantic Coast recognized the beauty and bounty of the land, and this recognition grew as settlers moved south and west and the United States grew into the nation that it is today. But along with this appreciation for the natural wonder that is our country, we have also felt, for centuries, a sense of ownership—this land is ours, and we can do with it as we please. And despite strains of environmentalism that are nearly as old as the United States itself, what we have done to the land (and the water, the sky, and all of the creatures that inhabit them) often has not been good. All of which is to say that, just as we affect and define the natural world, as the readings in *Green* show, so too does nature affect and define us. We can again look to the Gulf Coast to see this dynamic in action: In any environmental disaster, we—our livelihoods, our cultures, and our psyches—are just as much a part of the damaged environment as the fouled water, air, land, and animals.

To close our introduction, and to open the readings, we turn now to another measure of our connection to the environment and its connection to us, popular music. What follows are the lyrics from two songs—“This Land Is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie, from the 1940s, and “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” by Marvin Gaye, from the 1970s. Each of these, though separated by decades, speaks to our relationship to and treatment of the land, the natural world, and the planet. And, like much of the rest of *Green*, they also reveal identities that are built on connections to and concerns for the environment.

When folk music icon Woody Guthrie first sang in the 1940s that “this land was made for you and me,” he was proclaiming his belief that America—the land and all that it represented—was meant for everyone, not a privileged few. While “This Land Is Your Land” is more political than environmental, a close reading shows the intricate links between America the place, the American spirit, and Americans’ sense of identity. Coming nearly thirty years later, during a flowering of environmental awareness and advocacy, soul legend Marvin Gaye’s “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)” gets straight to the point about ongoing threats to the environment: “Oh, things ain’t what they used to be / No, no / Where did all the blue sky go?”

To take the comparison a step further, do an online search for the lyrics to “Wake Up America,” the 2010 song co-written by Miley Cyrus. In it, the pop princess expresses the mix of concern and confusion that many of us feel about the environment today: We know something needs to be done, but we’re not sure what.



THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

By Woody Guthrie



This land is your land This land is my land
From California to the New York island;
From the red wood forest to the Gulf Stream
waters

This land was made for you and Me.

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As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway:
I saw below me that golden valley:
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts;
And all around me a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining, and I was strolling,
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting a voice was chanting:
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said "No Trespassing."
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,

That side was made for you and me.
In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people;
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking

Is this land made for you and me?
Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

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MERCY MERCY ME (THE ECOLOGY)

By Marvin Gaye



Oh, mercy mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Where did all the blue sky go?
Poison is the wind that blows
From the north, east, south, and sea
Oh, mercy mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Oil wasted on the oceans and upon our seas
Fish full of mercury
Oh, mercy mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be
No, no

Radiation in the ground and in the sky
Animals and birds who live nearby are dying
Oh, mercy mercy me
Oh, things ain't what they used to be

What about this overcrowded land?
How much more abuse from man can you stand?
My sweet Lord
My sweet Lord
My sweet Lord

Explore



Pop culture—as expressed through music, movies, TV, books, websites, and other media—can be an excellent indicator of the values and concerns of the society that produces it. Using the Guthrie, Gaye, and Cyrus song lyrics as models, find at least two other pop culture texts that express a point of view or make an argument about the environment. How do these texts convey their messages? How do they connect with their audiences? Do you think pop culture texts are an effective means of arguing for change? Why or why not?

Collaborate



With a group of classmates, use Google, Bing, or another search engine to find performances (audio or video) of “This Land Is Your Land,” “Mercy Mercy Me (the Ecology),” and “Wake Up America.” After studying the lyrics and listening to or watching the performances, come to a consensus on the following questions: What are the most significant rhetorical differences between lyrics written on a page and songs performed by an artist? Do you think one format is more effective than the other as an argument? Why?

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