

February 2020 Featured Writers: Writing in Fragile Environments

In August, the Eastern Michigan Writing Project hosted a weeklong Writing Institute, “Writing in Fragile Environments,” at the Parsons Center lodge. For five days, a group of professors, students, and experimental writers travelled to natural locations in northern Michigan to write and workshop together.



“This experience has drastically changed my writing and the way I look at fragile environments,” said Brittany Fuqua, an EMU student. “I loved this entire experience. [...] I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Each day, participants like Brittany would spend “sacred writing time” in secluded places away from the nearby cities. They were encouraged to think about how greatly the land in Michigan has changed over the last hundred or more years and draw inspiration from the remaining natural environments around them. Inspired by the lakes, dunes, woodlands, and abandoned farmhouses they visited, they wrote poetry, short stories, and experimental work.

Everyone had different personal writing goals for the institute, but they all worked on “capturing landscapes” through personal, expressive, and reflective writing styles. Some writers completed “geo-portraits,” or deep dives into specific locations. To do this, they interviewed local residents about their current lifestyles and compared their answers to how families had to survive in the same area centuries earlier.



One participant, Monica Lewis, wrote about Tweedle, a previous owner of the abandoned farm they visited who built a forge under the house. She imagined who would have lived there with

him and why he chose to place the forge beneath his own home, despite the potential danger. The poem is called, “Treat’s Forge in 1912.”

When they weren’t writing, participants also cooked meals together, built campfires, discussed the importance of preserving fragile environments, and reflected on how people and societies as a whole interacted with these environments, especially in the more isolated areas of northern Michigan.

Often, they talked about these main questions: What have we lost over the last hundred years? What have we gained? How do we begin the process of looking deeply over the expanse of history, time, and nature through writing?

As all but two of the participants happened to be current or future educators, the final question that often framed their discussions was this: How do we teach our students to investigate these questions through *their* thinking and writing?

Dr. Becky Sipe, who hosted the institute along with Dr. Ron Delph, said she enjoyed the institute immensely and, like Brittany Fuqua, hopes it will run again. She explained it as an extraordinary opportunity for exercises in personal writing and for thinking collaboratively about the natural environments



society too often takes for granted. The key to appreciating these environments, she said, is to “be here, be present,” and absorb every moment spent in them.

According to Dr. Sipe, it is in those quiet, tranquil, and intimate experiences with nature that a person is best able to reflect on the importance of the fragile beauty surrounding them.