

Writing Beyond Nature: Interview with Julian Hoffman

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Abstract



This interview discusses new nature writing in Europe with Greece-based writer Julian Hoffman. The dialogue explores the notion of new nature writing in Europe through Hoffman's practice, from the legacies and influences of the tradition and the contemporary development of the form to the ecological, political and social considerations of the places and people that inform and inspire his work. Focusing in particular upon Hoffman's 2013 publication *The Small Heart of Things: Being at Home in a Beckoning World* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), the discussion explores the ways in which the work approaches and accounts for the complex environmental and political geography of the region of the Prespa Lakes, described as a "transboundary park" bordering Greece, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Exploring the interconnected attention that Hoffman directs towards the nature, history and politics of the area, the discussion explores the possibilities of social and cultural engagement in nature writing. Further, it examines the ways that Hoffman's approach is informed by the particular complexities of the cultural and ecological landscapes of Prespa, addressing conceptions of nature and of place in borderlands and at the margins between regions. Additionally, the exchange explores Hoffman's use of digital media to mix the tradition of nature writing with photography.

Keywords: nature writing, Europe, Prespa, Julian Hoffman, ecology, culture.

Resumen

Esta entrevista analiza la nueva escritura de la naturaleza en Europa con el escritor afincado en Grecia Julian Hoffman. El diálogo explora la noción de nueva escritura de la naturaleza en Europa a través de la práctica de Hoffman, desde los legados e influencia de la tradición y el desarrollo contemporáneo de la forma hasta las consideraciones ecológicas, políticas y sociales de los lugares y la gente que forman su trabajo. Centrándose en particular en la obra de Hoffman de 2013 *The Small Heart of Things: Being at Home in a Beckoning World* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press), el análisis explora las formas en que el trabajo aborda y representa la compleja geografía medioambiental y política de la región de los lagos Prespa, descrita como un "parque trans-frontera" conlindante con Grecia, Albania y Macedonia. Explorando la atención interconectada que Hoffman presta a la naturaleza, la historia y la política de la zona, se analizan las posibilidades de compromiso social y cultural en la escritura de la naturaleza. Además, examina las formas en que el enfoque de Hoffman abarca las complejidades particulares de los paisajes culturales y ecológicos de Prespa, abordando los conceptos de naturaleza y lugar en las zonas fronterizas y los bordes entre regiones. Asimismo, el intercambio explora el uso que hace Hoffman de los medio digitales para mezclar la tradición de la escritura de la naturaleza con la fotografía.

Palabras clave: escritura de la naturaleza, Europa, Prespa, Julian Hoffman, ecología, cultura.

Julian Hoffmann is author of *The Small Heart of Things: Being at Home in a Beckoning World* (2013) and blogs at *Notes from Near and Far* www.julianhoffman.wordpress.com. *The Small Heart of Things* won the 2012 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Award for Creative Nonfiction and the 2014 National Outdoor Book Award for Natural History Literature. Other fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *Earthlines*, *Kyoto Journal*, *Flyway*, *The Redwood Coast*

Review, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *Silk Road Review*, *Southern Humanities Review* and *Terrain.org*, where his essay “Faith in a Forgotten Place,” which features in *The Small Heart of Things*, won the 2011 Nonfiction Award. Hoffman’s writing of place extends from explorations of the Prespa region of Greece, where he has lived and worked since 2000, to his childhood home in Ontario, Canada and birthplace in the north of England. An attentiveness towards the practices of observing, experiencing and writing the material world links the disparate locations and qualities of these places, and at the same time highlights their distinctive local cultures, histories and ecologies. This attentiveness is of particular significance in Hoffman’s essays about south-eastern Europe, where the complex social and political histories of countries including Greece, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are woven into the fabric of the cultural and ecological landscape that is represented and reflected upon in the work.

Deborah Lilley. *This issue of Ecozona is concerned with new European nature writing, so firstly, how do you relate to the term and the tradition of “nature writing,” and the emergence of ideas of “new nature writing”?*

Julian Hoffman. Writing about the natural world is flourishing at the moment, particularly in the English language. The list of exciting and innovative writers working through ideas and issues of landscape, ecology, wildlife, place and belonging in their work is heart-warmingly long: Philip Hoare, Kathleen Jamie, Melissa Harrison, Robert Macfarlane, Alison Hawthorne Deming, David George Haskell, Rick Bass and BK Loren, to name just a few from the UK and North America only. And that rich resurgence has brought about a parallel questioning of whether the term “nature writing” is suitable anymore considering the complex and varied responses to the conflicted natural world that these writers bring with them.

I have mixed feelings about the term myself. I have sympathy with some of the criticisms; that it feels you’re being pigeon-holed as a writer; that the new nature writing is about so much more than communion with nature, or “self-enthronement” as Jason Cowley calls it in *Granta’s The New Nature Writing* issue (9). But when I look at some of the alternatives that have been suggested – environmental writing, ecoliterature, place-based writing—I see that they equally have their limitations and prescriptive connotations. Just as language fluidly embraces all kinds of societal, generational and technological shifts in usage, terminology has a comparable elasticity. Much of the worry about “nature writing,” it seems to me, is premised on expectation—what a reader will expect from a book that’s described as such. Robert Macfarlane is regularly described as a nature writer, even though his recent book, *The Old Ways*, is so much more than what might have traditionally been considered a part of the genre, including travel, memoir, geography, geology, myths, biography, history, landscape and politics. The book was a top-ten bestseller this past year in the UK, and when I spoke at a festival on the same day as Macfarlane recently, it was extraordinarily thrilling to see how many people suddenly packed into the venue when it was his turn to speak. The increasing popularity of the genre, given its diverse range of voices and ways of engagement, suggests that nature writing doesn’t solely mean “the lyrical pastoral tradition of the romantic wanderer,” in

Cowley's words, anymore (9). So I begin to wonder whether readers' expectations of what nature writing—and more importantly, what nature writing might possibly be and become in all its varied permutations and forms—is shifting at the same time as the writing evolves. Perhaps readers have less trouble with the term that writers, editors and critics sometimes do.

DL. *Secondly, how do you interpret the term “European nature writing”? Given the well-recognised traditions of British and American nature writing, is there a distinctively “European” version for you? Or, is nature writing something that can be identified in Europe by nation, or bioregion, for example?*

JH. Language is the limiting factor here; unless work is in translation—and not only into English but from Spanish to German and Italian to Russian, let's say—then it's extremely difficult to get anything more than a cursory understanding of European nature writing as a whole. And in a way I'd be surprised if there was an easily definable tradition, as the continent is so varied in its landscapes, ecosystems and accompanying cultures. Those languages which make it difficult to read without the aid of translation bring a rich diversity and vision of their own, enabling national and bioregional characteristics of nature writing to emerge. Language is one way in which the natural world is mediated. A recent report revealed a direct link between habitat loss and the decline of languages across the planet (Loh and Harmon 2014). Many of the world's 7000 languages have emerged in relationship to very specific places, and as those places are lost so too are the languages sustained by the habitat. Cultural diversity, for me, is as important as biodiversity. They are strands in the rich weave of the world.

The photographer Dominick Tyler is currently working on a terrific idea called The Landreader Project, in which he's gathering words—scientific, colloquial and regional—that define and reflect aspects and features of the British landscape, particularly words that have been lost or fallen out of use.¹ This vocabulary of landscape is a connection between us and the living world. When you begin to read some of the fabulous terms that have evolved to describe something as specific and delicate as the indentation left by a flatfish in the sand, for example—in Cumbria the word is “doake”—you begin to see how closely interwoven the human and the non-human have been, and how those relationships find a place within language. When I think of what it would be like to gather together landscape glossaries in Portuguese, Latvian, Swedish and all the other tongues of Europe, not to mention the regional dialects, you'd have an extraordinary, European repository of human connection to place and environment. Tyler has said that “when we don't have language for things we treat them differently; when we can't adequately describe the landscape we can't adequately connect with the landscape” (2014). His glossary is an opportunity for re-acquaintance.

¹ See <http://www.thelandreader.com>

DL. *How is your writing influenced by the places that you write about? And more specifically, how did you approach writing about the complex ecological and political geographies of the Prespa region?*

JH. Place is at the heart of my writing, both fiction and non-fiction. It shapes us in so many critical ways; our first memories are often born of place. When I think back to my childhood I recall with great clarity the suburbs and streets of southern Ontario, but also the sunshine-flooded meadows and abandoned fields that we discovered amongst the houses as kids. I vividly remember the yearly visits back to my native north of England, the moorlands rolling away into the grey distance, the gleaming tide pools and scent of salt and seaweed along the shore. These memories of place remain the first compass points of self for me and my attachment to place. So I'm always looking for the particular stories and atmospheres that emerge from the landscape: it's what fascinates me as a writer.

Writing about the Prespa Lakes region was a particular challenge as the area is shared by three countries—Greece, Albania and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia—so although you have surface similarities of landscape, habitat and wild species, they're varied as places, shaped by different languages, traditions, religions and histories. So as I began to write about the natural world of the region, I had to keep in mind how the ecologies of each country were also shaped by those varying histories. The human and non-human worlds are deeply interwoven here, in ways both positive and negative. This is a transboundary park containing villages, fishermen, endemic fish, pelicans, bears, farmers, wolves, and sheep, so certain conflicts of interest arise. As Myrsini Malakou of the Society for the Protection of Prespa has said: "You can't say that the national border is more important than any other. There is a geological border here, between limestone and granite, an ecosystem border between wetland and upland. There are borders of interest and activity—the fisherman, the farmer, the environmentalist. Borders are a limit or a challenge, a restriction or an opportunity. Where there are borders, there are bridges" (*Small Heart of Things* 140). I set out to look for some of those borders and bridges when writing the book.

DL. *I was struck in particular by the essay "The Memory of Land and Water," which is divided into sections by location. The essay seems consciously structured around the concept of a "transboundary park." Could you talk about the structure of the essay and the way that it relates to the ecological, geographical and political structures that it addresses?*

JH. Although "The Memory of Land and Water" was one of the earlier essays I wrote for the book, I'd already been living in the Prespa region for some years by then and had been discovering how traces of the area's past were scattered about the land. For five years after moving here my wife and I were organic market-gardeners. As we dug the soil we would sometimes turn over coins with Arabic script on them that must have fallen from someone's pocket when this region was part of the Ottoman Empire. From time to time we pulled bullets from the earth, and I once found an old artillery shell in the hills from the Greek Civil War. Signs of the recent past, like the white ribbons tied to

trees which are used to guide Albanian labourers over the border, mingled with older signs such as the high mountain road laid by French troops during the First World War and concrete bunkers built by Albania's paranoid dictator Enver Hoxha. As I read about the area and listened to the people who lived here talk about their own histories in this place at the crossroads of three countries, I saw how the land still held onto its stories, remembering in traces—some faint, others bold—all that had passed over it.

As we continued putting down roots and making a home for ourselves here I wanted to write an essay which brought some of those traces to light and place the three countries together on the page in the same way that they exist geographically—side by side and overlapping in land and water. In 2000, the same year that we arrived in Prespa, the Prime Ministers of the three countries that share the lakes had signed an agreement making Prespa the first transboundary park in the Balkans.² In the agreement they pledge to “protect the unique ecological values” of the area while maintaining a “peaceful collaboration” between countries. The two words—“peaceful collaboration”—hinted at conflicts and violent histories that I wanted to elaborate on in the essay, together with the ecological significance of the watershed as a shared place for human and non-human communities.

DL. *Considering the term “transboundary” further, I found that this term seemed to apply to your writing—through attention to nature, a sense of a transboundary approach to the Prespa region emerges. At the same time, though, your writing expresses clearly the national concerns that impinge upon the treatment and understanding of land, animals and people across political borders. How do you approach writing about a region that is understood so variously and often contradictorily?*

JH. Political borders will nearly always impinge on our understanding of land and water. Taking the Prespa Lakes as an example, the borders that separate the three countries run through the water in strict and unbending lines, taking no account of the shape of the watershed or the movements of fish and other species. And that's not surprising, considering that each country wants access to the natural resources and livelihoods provided by the lakes. But ultimately, while writing “The Memory of Land and Water,” it was the natural world that revealed what transboundary means in the truest sense of the word. The wild animals of the area were living *across borders*, staying true to habitat and ancient patterns of movement. Recently there have been some positive developments on this front; the European Union's Water Framework Directive is premised on the fact that “rivers do not stop at national frontiers.”³ It's an enlightened legislative approach to a shared resource, based not on national or political delineations, but instead on natural geographical and hydrological formations, like river basins and catchment areas that can be found across borders in a place like Prespa. This policy follows in the path of those animals, plants and water currents that are already transboundary in behaviour.

² See “Declaration”: http://www.spp.gr/spp/declaration_en.pdf

³ See “EU Water Framework Directive”: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/water/water-framework/index_en.html

DL. *Reading your essays, transience is a theme that seemed pertinent to me—in terms of the migration of animals and people, and the changes that occur within particular regions, for instance geological, climatological and political transitions. At the same time, the idea of traces and tracks also seem important—in terms of the legacies of these movements and changes. How do these themes relate to or inform your perception of place?*

JH. Everything is in motion. From animals and water to people, clouds and trees. Even stone isn't still; however slow the process might be, it's being worn by weather and time into new shapes and designs. And yet we have a tendency to expect stasis of a place. Whether that's about some kind of desire for settledness in these brief, inexplicable lives I don't know, but that expectation can lead to a kind of yearning or nostalgia for the past. I think many of us will have known that odd and dislocating experience of returning to a place that you knew well when you were younger only to find that it has changed to such a degree that you've become a stranger.

The river that runs through our village empties into Great Prespa Lake at the foot of the valley and the river mouth there is one of my favourite places in the entire basin, not only because kingfishers sail like blue tracers over the water or that nightingales fill the willows with so much summer song that there's no room for anything else, but because it's always noticeably changing. It's never the same from one visit to the next. One month a crescent of sand reaches like an arm into the lake; at other times the river has broken through and sluiced the sand away or pooled about the adjacent reeds, even washed away a tree. And that same river, over the course of thousands and thousands of years, has carried silt and sediment down from the mountains, slowly creating the isthmus that turned the Prespa Lakes from one body of water into two. So the rivermouth has taught me a great deal about impermanence, but while I try to embrace this shifting world and all that's caught up in its sway I think it's also important to notice and honour what's gone before us.

Those tracks you mention are a glimpse—into an animal's life or another group of people who lived in this very same place. Tracks and traces are ways of deepening the connection to the place we stand in. The mountains behind our village can look strange to a newcomer. They seem to be rippled with green waves, often rising nearly to the peak. In fact they're abandoned agricultural terraces, dating from before the Greek Civil War when our village held 3,000 people instead of the 150 that it has today. Those terraces were essential for existence here, bolstering the subsistence livelihoods of the villagers with cereal crops. And it's this human legacy that's partially fashioned the land as it is today.

DL. *In your writing practice, how do you approach the responsibility of the representation of place, and what are your considerations and concerns in this regard?*

JH. Sigurd Olsen once wrote that, "Awareness is becoming acquainted with environment, no matter where we happen to be" (69). This is an idea that's key to me in my walking, travelling and writing. The sheer mathematics of our existence means that we can only know a handful of places with the kind of depth made possible by long tenure. There simply isn't enough time in life to live in more than a few places for a lengthy period of

time. But that doesn't mean that we can't cultivate an awareness and curiosity in each moment as we move between places, fostering an attention to those "murmurs at every turn," whether they're glimpsed through a train window or during a holiday weekend on the coast.

But this approach to place, attentive and open, needs to be respectful of local communities—human and non-human—for a responsible representation to emerge when later writing about it. Who lives here? What are the histories of this place? What's at stake in the landscape? For an essay like "Faith in a Forgotten Place," I had the opportunity to spend an entire year visiting the Albanian village that I write about, speaking in depth to the women that were working on a cross-border ecotourism project. However in "An Accumulation of Light," for example, I had only a single day on the Bulgarian steppe where a sculpture stands, commemorating the legend of forty Bulgarian women jumping from the cliffs into the Black Sea to escape an Ottoman invasion. I wanted to tell those stories as sensitively as I could – in one case through listening directly to the women's stories and in the other through a respectful imagining. Some of my essays require more research and listening than others, depending on their intention and scope, but I strive for an element of empathy in all of them.

DL. *In the "Preface" to The Small Heart of Things, you describe "a capacity to see things anew" (xiii). Could you explain a little more about that process of attention that you describe? And, in your essay "An Accumulation of Light," you also write that "the art of perceiving is more about reception than it is vision" (41). Could you talk about your understanding of the relationship between attention, reception and place? How do these ideas relate to the notion of a "beckoning world" that you describe, borrowing from Rainier Marie Rilke?*

JH. Children are the great guides to perception, practising what I call an equality of interest. Children make little distinction between major and minor discoveries—a feather can be as thrilling as the pelican it came from - and that equality of focus, sometimes on the smallest, most ordinary of things, is something I try to cultivate wherever I am. It's one way of trying to "see things anew."

Two lines by Rilke provide the focus for the entire book: "everything beckons us to perceive it / murmurs at every turn" (Rilke 108; *The Small Heart of Things* 41). What I love about Rilke's words is the opportunity they give us: they're an invitation to openness. He encourages us to let in the wild and unpredictable, but also the ordinary, unsung and overlooked. Be open to everything around us: be open to the smallest of things.

Place is composed of so many particulars, including weather, cultures, ecosystems, traditions, wildlife, architecture, songs, light and geology. The list could go nearly endlessly on, and yet we still suffer from a kind of indifference towards many places. Travel guidebooks are a good example of this tendency. They're geared towards the "must-see" things like churches, museums, historical monuments and grand views. And yet I've had some of the most marvellous travel experiences in places where the guide books tell you there's little to be seen or done. Small experiences, like a warm-

hearted conversation with someone in a dusty shop, a slant of light in the narrow backstreets, watching starlings swirl over a city centre. Rebecca Solnit writes that “when you give yourself to places, they give you yourself back” (13). I think that travel requires stillness, to be motionless while in movement. Film studies have shown that a kestrel moves less than 6mm in any direction while it hovers. In the midst of that wild beating of wings it is essentially still. And that is how I think we can approach place in the most enriching way—by being mindful of the moment and open to all its varied possibilities. Being still and in motion at the same time. That’s what I wanted to explore in *The Small Heart of Things*—how we might go about being at home in the world, deepening our connections to the places we encounter, regardless of where we might be.

DL. You mention several other writers here and in your work, such as Rilke and W. G. Sebald, as well as other contemporary nature writers, including Richard Mabey, Mark Cocker and Robert Macfarlane. Could you talk about your influences and how other writing about nature relates to your practices?

JH. Something that’s of real importance to me is community, whether it’s people working together across borders to preserve a common ecosystem or the encircling community of wild creatures that we share this planet with. And the community of fellow writers and artists is equally sustaining on a personal level. I see their work as a window; each one opening onto a different view of the world. Together their words and art enable a broadened vision of our place in that world. Each writer has his or her own “patch” as it were—themes they work through, places and patterns they explore—and reading their words is a way of attuning myself to other landscapes and realities, other species and shades of light. Many writers have helped shape me as a writer over the years: books such as *Findings* and *Sightlines* by Kathleen Jamie are like love letters to the natural world and important to be kept near; the work of Barry Lopez has led me to places, both in landscape and in the heart, that have proved deeply moving; Peter Mattheissen and Terry Tempest Williams have revealed spiritual and political connections between people, place and wildlife that have been profoundly important to me.

But not all of my influences are literary. One of the things that I often feel when out on the land, or in the presence of wild creatures, is a rich sense of mystery. And it is that mystery that moves me. I find it difficult to describe that sensation as it’s deeply personal and beyond the realm of language, an ineffable connection with the turning world. And I’m not talking solely of encounters with totemic wild animals like bears, for example, or landscapes as majestic as high, snow-capped mountains and unfathomable deep canyons, but of common and everyday experiences as well. When fog rolls in off the sea or a swift scythes an urban sky; when damselflies glitter above grasses like electric blue filaments or wind ripples silver through meadow-grass. For me these experiences reflect, in the words of the American writer Jim Harrison, “the luminosity of what is always there” (2008).

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Annie Dillard writes that “our life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery” and I’ve been greatly influenced by artists delving into that mystery, including Dillard herself (11). I’m drawn to the work of Arvo Pärt, whose

luminous music conveys such clarity, a deeply spiritual, searching sound; photographers such as Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose seascapes are mesmeric and meditational, and the Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos, whose films blend landscape and memory in such a slow and patient way that they become characters themselves. There is a kind of sustained stillness about the work of these artists that inspires me to be more still in my relationship with the natural world and in my writing; to be more open to the moment and the everyday mysteries of light, weather and wild creatures that we're constantly capable of experiencing wherever we happen to be.

DL. *As well as your book and writing published in print and digital magazines and journals, you write a blog and are active in social media—could you explain how these different media work for you and your writing, and the places that you write about?*

JH. Digital media have radically altered the way stories can be told. Nothing can replace the physical book for me, but it's been wonderful and illuminating to discover the number of people writing, talking and thinking about the natural world through online media, particularly in blogs. In a sense the blog is an ideal form for nature writing: like Gilbert White in his influential 1789 book *The Natural History of Selborne*, bloggers tend to write of their parish particulars, all the fabulous and close-to-home details of their surroundings. There's also an immediacy which I like about blogs, a real-time echo of the seasons, unfurling or drawing in, settling in place. If Gilbert White had been living today his observational diary of letters from Selborne may well have taken a digital form.

I started my own blog, *Notes from Near and Far*, as a way of exploring place through words and images. I love taking photos and the blog format is an ideal way of weaving them together with text. I tend to write a short essay every month or two about some aspect or impression of place – whether it's a particular cast of light, the story of an abandoned cemetery in the summer-parched hills or the astonishing recovery of elephant seals at Año Nuevo on the American coast. *Notes from Near and Far* takes a quote from Alix Kater Shulman as its inspiration: "Within walking distance of any spot on Earth there is probably more than enough mystery to investigate in a lifetime" (207). The essays are dispatches from the places I encounter.

One of the great thrills of writing a blog and using Twitter these past few years has been the discovery of so many terrific writers and artists that I might not have learned about otherwise. It's a wonderful online community to be a part of. And it's also possible to reach a completely different audience with your work; there's a greater intimacy about the form and it enables you to have conversations with readers. Starting the blog was one of the best things I ever did as a writer.

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