

# A Syllabus for A Deep Map of Place

## Our intentions

Over at least ten millennia people have made maps, mostly held in memory, of the San Juan River country. Pleistocene hunters and Desert Archaic foragers, Puebloan farmers, local Navajos and Utes, scouts for the Mormon wagon trains, Europeans mining for artifacts or gold or uranium, and now the guides and artists of Bluff City have all possessed intimate knowledge of local geography. Declaring our camp above the river as ‘the center of the Known Universe,’ we’ll plot points from these maps and from our own sensory investigations onto deep maps of place.

Walking, reading, talking with the locals, we’ll gather information. Applying a poet’s tools for inquiry – keen attention, the curious imagination, and spot on language are some – we’ll delve further into the deep particularity of this country. Along the way we’ll speculate on the importance of this work in addressing our own lives and landscapes.

## Our work together

Noticing. As much as anything this course will be about noticing, opening all six senses, as well as the intellect, to the landscape. Of course, this will require wandering off for quiet time alone. I’ll suggest some activities for honing the senses, including drawing or mapping or pure play.

Exploring. On our own or with members of the Bluff community we’ll explore the physical and cultural geography of the local terrain. Please see the itinerary for more on these excursions.

Writing. We’ll write every day, in camp or out on the trail or if the weather’s bad wherever we can keep our paper dry. Most of our writing will be imaginative field notes on both outer and inner landscapes. I hope that keeping a field journal will encourage these things: Coming to our senses + Capturing the moment + Discovering connections + Noting particularity + Nurturing curiosity + Looking out/looking in + Loving language + Finding your place in the nature of things.

A poet myself, I’ll suggest writing exercises for this journal that come from a poet’s perspective and experience, but you may do the exercises in any genre from a reflective journal entry to a poem to a personal essay or story. I hope you’ll try lots of forms. Each small writing experiment is chosen to nurture the habit of noting well and then exploring beneath the surface of the things. Eventually I’d like you to complete a small collection of word sketches and poems, as well as a short essay, that illuminate the resonance between the tangible landscape and the landscape of story and belief.

Reading Of course, we’ll read our own work to one another. And I’ve made copies of a few pieces of writing by other folks. We’ll talk both about their contribution to our deep

map of place and about things like style and craft. We'll also read some poems and stories aloud as inspiration for our own work.

The readings to do on your own are an eclectic mix of writings about local cultures and landscapes and about learning a place. They're mostly short and fun to think about. (I also have a traveling library you are more than welcome to borrow from if you want to read more).

#### Mapping Place (Days 1 and 2)

'Learning Home, Part 1' from The Last Cheater's Waltz by Ellen Meloy

'The V.e.c.t.o.r.l.o.s.s. Project' by Michael Branch

'Unmeasurable Phenomena' by Hannah Hinchman

Excerpts from Blue Pastures by Mary Oliver

#### Stories of the People (Day 3 and 4)

'Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination,' by Leslie Marmon Silko

An excerpt from *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* by Keith Basso

Excerpts from *Saanii Dahataal (The Women Are Singing)* by Luci Tapahanso

'Dwellings' by Linda Hogan

'Looking Backward' from Mormon Country by Wallace Stegner

#### The River (Day 5)

'Dawn' from River Notes by Barry Lopez

Excerpts from Waterlines: Journeys on a Desert River by Ann Weiler Walka