**Interview with Jesse Oak Taylor**

**“Dwelling Critically: Ecocriticism and Public-Facing Writing”**

ANNIE DWYER: Welcome to *Going Public*, a podcast dedicated to exploring public scholarship and publicly-engaged teaching in the humanities. My name is Annie Dwyer and, at the time of this recording, I am the Assistant Program Director of a Mellon initiative at the University of Washington’s Simpson Center for the Humanities.

The initiative's name is *Reimagining the Humanities PhD and Reaching New Publics: Catalyzing Collaboration*. Since 2015, two successive Mellon initiatives by this name have supported public scholars at the University of Washington–both faculty developing new graduate seminars in the humanities with public-facing components, and doctoral students pursuing public projects in the humanities. The episodes of *Going Public* consist of interviews with Mellon-supported public scholars after they have launched their projects or taught their public-facing seminars.

Please do check out our companion website, which includes faculty fellow syllabi as well as doctoral student fellow project overviews, artifacts, and other ephemera.

The podcast, along with the website, is intended to serve as a resource for scholars interested in developing similar projects and seminars. You can find the *Going Public* website at [www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic](http://www.simpsoncenter.org/goingpublic). You can also find the link in the description of today’s episode.

Today's episode, "Dwelling Critically," is an interview with Jesse Oak Taylor, Associate Professor of English and Director of Undergraduate Programs in the English Department at the University of Washington. In the summer of 2020, Jesse received a Mellon Summer Fellowship for New Graduate Seminars in the Humanities. Over that summer, he developed a course titled “Ecocriticism: A Seminar in the Public Humanities,” which he taught for the first time in winter of 2022. Our conversation explores, among other things, the difference between ecocriticism and environmental humanities, the value of public-facing writing, and the payoff of experimentation in doctoral education.

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ANNIE DWYER: Jesse, thank you so much for joining me today.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

ANNIE DWYER: Your course offers an introduction to ecocriticism and publicly-engaged intellectual work. You make this interesting distinction in your course description between ecocriticism and terms like the "environmental humanities." Can you speak a little more to that? How is ecocriticism distinct, and what kind of work is it doing to anchor your course?

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Sure. The answer has a couple of parts. The most basic answer is that environmental humanities is a broadly interdisciplinary field (if it is even a field–it’s a constellation of fields) that involves people from History. Environmental history is one of the most established disciplinary venues for environmental work in the humanities. Ecocriticism is the version that plays out in literary studies. It's literary critics thinking about the environment and thinking about their practice in relation to environmental issues.

But especially as I was framing this course and as I was trying to…initially, I was trying to use the term "ecocriticism" to help narrow the focus a little bit, trying to pick “What are we going to cover?” But in the course of doing that, I was leaning on the term a little more and thinking about how criticism as a mode of practice that wouldn't have to be only environmental–it could focus on anything–is both a mode of paying attention, of reading carefully and closely–whether you're reading a text or whether you're encountering any other kind of object, paying close attention to it. But then certainly once you try to share that reading, it also has this critical edge. It involves a form of assessment in the way that, when you read a book review or a film review in the newspaper, part of what you're wondering is: “Is this a good movie or not? Should I go see this? Should I go to this restaurant?” We don't always think about academic criticism as having that evaluative component, but that was another piece that I wanted to hold on to.

Over on the other side, the “eco” side: the prefix "eco" comes from "oikos," which means "house" or "dwelling" in Greek. And in that sense, it's the same prefix as "economy." Both are ways of dwelling, thinking about how we live. On some basic level, "ecocriticism" means thinking critically about dwelling or even dwelling critically. One of the things that we tried to do in the course was to keep circling back to how the people we were reading, and the discussions we were having were ways of dwelling in place in a more conscientious way. Sometimes that involved discussions about your carbon footprint or how to live. But that wasn't the main emphasis we were trying to give it. It was more: “How do you dwell with attention? How do you close read your surroundings? How do you make ethical, artistic, aesthetic, political judgment about your surroundings?”

ANNIE DWYER: I love that idea of dwelling critically. I'm wondering–to give listeners a little more of the texture of your course–how did you scaffold this? What was the week-to-week rhythm or assignment schedule like?

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: It played out in several different ways. I was hoping that we would have some field trips. We were going to do a few things like that, all of which ended up getting scrapped because of COVID concerns. But the ways that it did play out…. One is in terms of what we were reading. Obviously, everything we read was to one extent or another public-facing, and I would say there was a range. We can maybe talk about that. It was a range of how public-facing. But certainly the first couple texts that we read in the quarter were memoirs that were also dealing with intellectual issues in a substantive way. That's Lauret Savoy's book *Trace* and Robert Macfarlane's *Underland*–both of them explicitly take the reader on journeys. They talk about the travels that they're doing. They involve these personal reflections and so on so that you can see in the book a person reading the landscape and providing an interpretive reading of the landscape that they're moving through.

In terms of the assignments, I had a weekly writing assignment every week. For the first several weeks, those were trying to push people into a form of creative writing. I was trying to get them out of their academic voice to do some kind of memoir-influenced writing or something more creative, more speculative. That stuck through the first five weeks–the first half of the quarter was different writing prompts that were asking people to play around in different ways with different voices. In the comments that I was giving people, I was going out of my way to push them further: “Great! This is awesome. What if you did this?”

In the second half, the weekly writing assignments were designed to be scaffolding towards the final project. That worked well. The final projects that I got for this class were fantastic, so I'm going to try some form of that scaffolding of creative first-half weekly writings, scaffold it towards the final weekly writings in every graduate seminar I teach, forever. But in this case in particular, because it had the creative push, a number of students ended up developing something they had written as an experimental thing in one of those first weeks. That did become their final project.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, that's fantastic. Do you have any examples that you could share with us?

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Sure. One person was an avid surfer. And in those couple of first weeks, when we were reading things like the Robert Mcfarlane that involved caving and climbing and these types of things. This person had ended up writing [a] memoir about surfing. And I was like, “This is fabulous! Look at all these ways that it opens out into the planetary and how you have to be thinking about gravity and all these energy flows in order to talk about what happens when you surf.” And he developed that as a final essay.

Another person–I'm trying to think when she started on this idea. I think it came in a little later in the course, but I would have to go back and look back at the weekly writing. In any case, she was thinking about the commodity chain and buying a cheap t-shirt. And how would you connect the various dots of where this t-shirt came from in both human labor but also photosynthesis to grow cotton…and the whole colonial history of the cotton plants and all of these things? This was one where, as she was framing the project, she decided, “OK, I'm going to do a website and there's various things to map this commodity chain.” I was like, “Well, what if you could print it on the t-shirt?”–which was precisely the kind of thing that I wouldn't have even thought of if we hadn't been doing these various creative writing assignments. She not only took that and ran with it. In order to do that, she made a QR code and screen printed the QR code onto a t-shirt, which you can then track. It's a working QR code. I have it right here. It goes to her website, where she unpacks and maps the commodity chain. That was a wonderful example.

Several people did websites of different sorts. One person did an atlas of the Miyazaki film universe, *Princess Mononoke* and all those films. One person started out writing a couple of poems, because I was encouraging people to do these more creative pieces. And what she ended up doing was basically writing a poem sequence about oak trees and history and memory.

In each case, I think people were a little uncomfortable at the beginning with the creative prompts. But then, A) they eventually had fun with it. And B) as it played out, it led to these creative projects that were all the way across the board also sophisticated in terms of being reflexive about the way that they were writing, the connection between the forms they were using and the critical argument they were making. Because that was something that wasn't taken for granted.The one thing you couldn't do is write a straight-up academic essay.

ANNIE DWYER: I love those examples. They're so interesting. And I'm thinking, too, about the materiality of the t-shirt. One of the productive tensions that might emerge in publicly-engaged work that emerges from [an] ecocritical perspective is this…I don't know. There's a way in which it calls into question the humanistic presumptions undergirding conversations about publics and public scholarship. It becomes quickly apparent. I’m wondering if you might say a little more about how the practice of public scholarship shifts when non-human worlds enter into the scope of concerns.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: It's a great question. One thing that was certainly true of my course, for the way the syllabus was put together, is that we read books. We read so that, all the way through it, we had a book a week. That was the schedule. In some respects, that's the classic grad seminar model, especially in disciplines that are more theory-heavy. The only other time that I've taught a seminar that operated on that model was a theory seminar where “public” was not part of the conversation. Otherwise, I have usually taught a series of novels and then articles and book introductions and all of that layered together.

But here I picked, week by week, books that were at least somewhat public-facing. For one thing, there are right now coming out a series of books that are thinking about non-humans in really interesting ways. So a real high point for me was Bathsheba Demuth's *Floating Coast*. She writes beautifully and in sophisticated ways about whales and caribou and energy flows and seals and foxes and folds all of this together. This is a beautiful model for thinking in richly more-than-human ways. We also talked about how a couple of the books that we were reading were unfair models. It's like watching the Olympics and being like, “Oh, here just go do that or something.”

ANNIE DWYER: [LAUGHING] Yeah.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: But laying that aside, I think that we are in a moment, culturally and intellectually, where people have found the language to talk about some of those questions in ways that can also be genuinely public-facing. The flip side is that some of the work that undergirds that is hard theory that is not public-facing at all. Without realizing it, we had this recurrent conversation that kept circling back to some principles of post-structuralist theory. An offshoot of this course, that went into going back and reading Derrida and things like that, would have made a lot of intellectual sense for some of the things that we were doing. That wasn't a presence on the syllabus, but I do think that questions of what is human, what isn't, are so hard and so richly philosophical that there are whole other seminars buried in them.

The flip side is that the public-facing nature of the writing–and again, especially with a few of these books that are just good books–was [that] we were able to have this rich conversation precisely because we weren't spending so much of our time trying to figure out what the person was saying. When you deal with a difficult piece of academic writing in a seminar, a lot of what you spend your time doing is working through, “OK, page 27, what does this mean?”...and unpacking it at that level. We did some of that. I occasionally found myself giving these off-the-cuff lectures about the history of such-and-such an idea and then realizing, “Oh, I probably screwed that up. That's terrible. They're never going to understand the history of whatever, because they heard it from me.” But one of the benefits to the public-facing material is precisely the complexity of the ideas that it brings in–in a different way.

ANNIE DWYER: And it sounds like the work is primarily around engagement with those ideas rather than necessarily parsing them or comprehending them, because they're already presented in a way that's accessible to a lay audience.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Yes. I think in general, yes. Well, and one other thing, I was just trying to think about your question of, what changes with the “eco” aspect? Another thing that definitely was recurrent through a number of the books, unsurprisingly, was an interest in energy and energy systems. That is so palpable in the world. Once you start realizing that almost everything around you is part of an energy system and you start looking at the sites of energy conversion in your immediate vicinity, it does change the way you look at the world–and in material ways. I don't know how much about those types of things people had thought coming in.

But as the quarter unfolded, those were some of the places where we were having robust discussions that involved the books. But they could also involve all these other things from people's lives by people being able to start with these more creative pieces that were about their daily life…and then, in many cases, pick some piece of that to be their project that they were unpacking. There was one certain student who's in the School of Education and is doing a project on the history of summer camps. She's been a camp director. Her project was organized around the generator at this camp that she ran and how most of the campers barely even knew it was there hidden away in a shed but important for all of these various features about how the camp runs. It's this big, clunky old diesel-powered generator. A lot of her project was thinking about suddenly paying attention to this thing that's designed to not be paid attention to.

That's ideology. On some level, it's this physical form of it. But it opens into all these other questions about various other forms of ideology. So I think that words like "material" get used so much in so many different ways in academic discourse, but energy in particular exists as this material thing. The laws of thermodynamics describe actual things in the world. Once you start there and that's the starting point of your discussion, it renders everything else more tangible in important ways.

ANNIE DWYER: As you're talking about how students are attending more closely to the material world, to their lived experiences, the question of activism comes up for me and the politics of the ideas that you're exploring. As students are trying to think about ecocriticism as a publicly-engaged practice, how does that overlap with or diverge from something like environmental activism or climate activism? And did you have any discussions about that?

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: We did. It's a great question. Interestingly, I don't know that any of the projects were activist projects. The closest was perhaps the t-shirt. When we talked a little about how you could even do a kind of applied activist version of this–you could print off those little QR codes and then go running through Target sticking them on all the clothes and try to have an intervention that way. We certainly talked a lot about the broader political and ethical implications of the inquiries that people were making. I think that, in a future version, I might try to include a unit or something that asks this question a little more directly, especially around rhetorical strategies within activist communities…would be the way that I would want to frame that.

We read Daegan Miller's book at the end of the quarter, which is called *This Radical Land: A Natural History of American Dissent.* He talks about these different examples of resistance communities. He goes to Thoreau. But he goes also to this socialist commune in the Redwoods that was trying to do a different social order and has a number of other examples. All of them to one degree or another failed because the history of the American 19th century is one of capitalist expansion and the destruction of nature. But he's trying to uncover these countercurrents.

We didn't read any what you might call "straight-up activist books." We didn't read a book by Bill McKibben or Greta Thunberg. I thought for a little while about Andreas Malm, reading *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*. Rob Nixon's book, *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, foregrounds activism. The scholar-activist figure is at the center of Nixon's project. We definitely talked about it in that context. And honestly, the week that we talked about Rob Nixon's book was probably our best discussion of the quarter. I'm not entirely sure why, but I think it's because if there's a spectrum of how public-facing the book is, how academic the book is, Nixon's is on the academic side of the spectrum that we were in but still public enough that it was right at a sweet spot.

ANNIE DWYER: I wonder if we can dig into that a little because your class is facing this challenge of both introducing students to public-facing work that falls under the ambit of ecocriticism in some way or within the ambit of ecocriticism in some way, and then you're also shifting between local and planetary scales and the deep time of the planet and the dizzying speed of the news cycle. There’s so many different shifts in scale and things to address. I wonder if you can speak a little to how to sort through these different priorities and how to do that recalibration in scale that I think an ecocriticism class in particular requires you to do.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: It's a tough challenge–it's always a tough challenge. There are certainly multiple versions of this course that I could imagine and that I considered. But one thing I haven't done is one that's organized around the Northwest. I would love to do that. It wouldn't just be local because the environmental history here is so fascinating and so connected to global issues on all these different fronts.

We talked a little about that in relation to the Bathsheba Demuth book. It does a fabulous job of having this regional focus that's also attentive to global connections. One of the things that I was upfront with on the first day of class was that the course has two main learning outcomes–as you mentioned, an introduction to ecocriticism and an introduction to the public humanities–and that sometimes those two things were going to be working together nicely but that also sometimes those two things were in tension. I do think that I ended up being very happy that I went with the “reading whole books” model.

ANNIE DWYER: There's something so valuable about reading a whole book and not just an excerpt.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: So many students had that response. I wasn't sure because it hasn't been the norm for the way that I've taught graduate seminars. It wasn't the norm with a few exceptions, usually outside the English Department. It wasn't the norm for the type of graduate seminar I took. But it resonated with them. For one thing, it meant that you then could have a conversation about “How is this project put together? What's their evidence base? How were they able to do this?” And in some cases, that was “They're able to do this because they are an internationally known writer. They have tremendous amounts of funding.” We were trying to think: “If you were going to do this, what would you have to do? And therefore, if you don't have access to X, Y, or Z that this person does, what version of this might you be able to do?”

One of the things that was interesting to me, when we got to the end of the quarter and we had a final project presentation day, many of the people built websites of one sort or another as a final project. We did not look at websites. We read books. Obviously, no one wrote a book, because that would be impossible. A few people did more essay-type things, but a lot of the form was something that we hadn't practiced or hadn't looked at models of. And I asked, “Well, do you think we should have?” And on the course evaluations, a couple of people said, “Yes, it would be nice to have models of the type of thing that we're doing.”

But the majority of people said, “No, reading the books worked because of the way that we were able to have these discussions of how this project is put together.” That attention to the decisions that had to be made in order to structure the project–that transferred over to whatever else they were trying to do. It also was key–to go back to your question–to organizing the term. It meant that, “OK, we have all these different questions that are overlapping. And rather than having a unit on the planet and a unit on climate change and a unit on deforestation, we have 10 weeks. We have 10 books.”

I try to have some distribution so that different books are picking up different pieces. But it meant that each week was dealing with some constellation of these problems. We had some recurrent themes. Scale, as you well know, is huge for any kind of environmental project. And then we would talk about, “How is this person dealing with the scale problem?”

Some of the books were humanist. Some of them were post-humanist. That was a distinction that we would come back to at different points. But on some pragmatic level, it allowed me to put the syllabus together in a way that worked, because I just had to pick 10 books.

ANNIE DWYER: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: We would talk about one of them, and so it gave us a fairly simple structure to move through.

ANNIE DWYER: Absolutely. That now makes sense to me. Having the book as a whole allows you to look at the mechanics of the book, how it's put together. And then that becomes transferable to other genres, other ways of writing, in a way that doesn't happen as easily when you're just taking an excerpt. Yeah. Thank you for giving language to that. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: One other thing that I just realized I did want to talk about a little bit…in some other classes, I've played around with "public-facing work" specifically using Manifold, the digital publishing platform that we have access to. We didn't use it in this course because it’s good for collaborative work. But a couple of previous classes that I've taught have had Manifold projects. There's the experimental aspect, but experimentation is great as long as you're in a safe space.

ANNIE DWYER: Exactly. Yeah.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: And the stakes are not too high. The impulse to go public with your public humanities work raises a whole other set of questions. That was a little less of a question in this grad seminar. Because I felt like it was totally up to them whether or not they were actually sharing these projects outside the class.

ANNIE DWYER: You're right. It raises a number of ethical questions. It's useful to think about the classroom itself as a public and as a place of experimentation. It doesn't necessarily need to lead to: everybody has access to this piece of writing, piece of work.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Yeah. Yeah. I think that is the important piece. I need to think about and we probably all need to think about: “When we're talking about ‘public-facing,’ who's the public and when do you go public?” You can be practicing a public-facing voice without necessarily hitting “Publish” on the thing.

ANNIE DWYER: Oh, I think that's such a wonderful note on which to end. What comes through so strongly in your class is the emphasis on play and experimentation and practice. Certainly, that's going to inform what your students do as they continue in their careers.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: I hope so. It was a fun class. This almost never happens to me–but I was genuinely sad when it ended. I would have happily signed on for five more weeks. That would have been fine.

ANNIE DWYER: That's always a good sign, too. Thanks so much for talking to me today, Jesse.

JESSE OAK TAYLOR: Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you.

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