# Day 1 Transcript: Julie Williams

**Alison Whiting:** Our final speaker for this hour is Julie Williams. Julie is an educator and activist with two decades of experience in policy outreach and qualitative research. In her current role at [MonTECH](https://montech.ruralinstitute.umt.edu/) she connects people with disabilities with technology that maintains and or improves their functional capacities. She earned a PhD in English from the University of New Mexico in 2017. Welcome, Julie.

**Julie Williams:** Thank you and thank you everyone for joining us today. Julie Williams joining you from Livingston, Montana in the United States. So thrilled to be here for this conference.

I am a white woman with shoulder-length dark hair that's straight. I have tortoiseshell round glasses and a blue button-down shirt that is unbuttoned to accommodate my 38-week pregnant belly, so I'm just happy this baby stayed put long enough for me to join you here today.

I would like to present to you some of the work that I've done in classrooms to incorporate the topic of ability, accessibility, disability, and ableism into nature writing and environmental literature. So here in the United States, the environmental movement and nature writing have long had a problem with kind of erasing the body in general because of an ableism problem.

So, there is an assumption of an able-bodied individual that is able to traverse into nature, and that is the basis for a lot of this literature. So, I'm trying to get my students and the general public out of that assumption and get them to question where that's coming from. Next slide please.

So these are a couple examples of classes I've taught this in. Nature writing in the American West, and an introduction to literature class that was paired with environmental studies. So we read a lot of environmental literature and the key questions that I want students to ask in these classes that focus on nature writing and environmental literature are how do relationships between the humans and their environment reflect and shape literature about landscape, the environment, the West. How do gender, race, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, and class shape the authors standpoint toward the natural world.

So, we're not just looking at ability and ableism, we're also looking at race, which is another problem with the environmental movement here in America that it has been predominantly white, upper to middle-class people that are able to access these spaces. So, we're trying to consider all these different ranges of experience and not just have this norm of that has been the kind of the foundations of the movement. So next slide, please.

We do start with the foundations of the movement as our starting spots, so we start with the transcendentalists. Most well-known Emerson and Thoreau, so I have some quotes from them that we examine in these classes.

The one by Emerson says, “Standing on the bare ground - my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.”

So, you see on the left an image that someone has sketched of this transparent eyeball on top of some really long legs, and he's just kind of erasing the body and the embodied experience in nature. In focusing on what he's seeing there rather than the bodily experience, not realizing that seeing itself is an embodied experience, and he's seeing through the lenses of his ability, race, and class. So, all of that's erased.

And then Thoreau from Walking: “I can easily walk ten, fifteen, twenty, any number of miles commencing at my own door, without going by any house, without crossing a road except for where the fox and the mink do…Man and his affairs, church and state and school, trade, and commerce…I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape…In wildness is the preservation of the world.”

In short, all good things are wild and free. And this is really a good quote by Thoreau from his nature for his essay on walking, about the way that wilderness and nature are valued in the United States. The wilder the better, the idea or concept that you have to be really remote to be accessing nature. That's the kind that's worth saving and preserving. It really runs underneath a lot of both environmental literature and the environmental movement, like the preservation movement. Next slide please.

So our first assignment in these classes that I teach or I ask students to peripatetic walks. So peripatetic philosophy is blocking philosophy where you are, just traversing your environment and thinking about it. So after we've read these walking philosophies, I ask students to choose one of the authors to meditate on as they walk around campus for the first 20 minutes of class and try to get into the character of the writer that they chose. So, can they embody what is being talked about in walking? The genius for sauntering and things like that? What type of nature do they see around them? How do they interact with it? And this is something that gets them to just be observational in their environment. I have had students with various disabilities, some in wheelchairs, some blind students, so they already are keyed into a lot of these things, that the students that haven't had those experiences are trying to observe more around them. Next slide, please.

We go from the foundations of Thoreau and Emerson to Edward Abbey who wrote a lot about accessibility in his novel Desert Solitaire. So here's what he has to say about accessibility: “The developers insist that the parks must be fully accessible not only to people, but to their machines, that is, to automobiles, motor boats, etc. The preservers argue, in principle at least, that wilderness and motors are incompatible, and that the former can best be experienced, understood, and enjoyed when the machines are left behind where they belong - on the superhighways and in the parking lots.”

So he's really strident in his viewpoint that nature should be accessible by foot only and he doesn't like any sort of development into the National Park system not even thinking about disability and accessibility that way, but just also accessibility to people who are able bodied but prefer to drive. So he's very strident in his viewpoint. Next slide please.

“What does accessibility mean? Is there any spot on Earth that men have not proved accessible by the simplest means? Feet and legs and heart. Even Mount McKinley, even Everest, had been surmounted by man on foot. That being the case, why is the Park Service generally so anxious to accommodate the other crowd, the indolent millions, born on wheels suckled on gasoline, who expect and demand paved highways to lead them in comfort, ease and safety into every nook and corner of the national parks.” So really equating the roads and development that allow for access with kind of laziness. It's his viewpoint here. Next slide, please.

So what does accessibility mean in the national parks in the United States? The national parks here were started in 1872 when Yellowstone was established, with more than two million acres of land in the Montana and Wyoming Territory were dedicated and set apart as a public part for pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. Wallace Stegner, another writer has said that the national parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic. They reflect us at our best rather than our worst.

So the national parks are founded with this idea that there for everyone, that they are this democratic idea, but when we examine the way that they've been written about and the environmental movement environmental literature in America, we can see how the body politic here has an ableism problem as well. So it's not surprising that these things are all connected in the national consciousness. Next slide, please.

So then I counteract that towards the end of class with Lucia Perillo’s - I've Heard the Vultures Singing. So this is a collection of essay where the author, Lucia Perillo, seeks a new way of connecting with nature that accommodates the physical challenges brought on by her MS (multiple sclerosis). So she taps into the larger social, social debate about the value of accessible nature. She was a former Park Ranger and developed MS and is getting out into nature in her wheelchair and documenting those experiences in that classic nature writing way of just observational what's around her. Next slide, please.

So in her essays she talks about how she feels about access where becoming handicapped has meant becoming a little more congenial in that my accessing wilderness now requires collaboration. She directly addresses Emerson and Thoreau, she says, the two Craftsman of our national mental template when it comes to both individualism and nature. “The great man is he who, in the midst of the crowd, keeps with this independence of solitude, says Emerson in his famous screed self-reliance which gives justification to just about any psychopath who feels he's possessed by genius. Thoreau, famous for his solitary stay at Walden Pond, similarly describes the kind of solitary life that is contingent on good health. Builder of cabins, sower of beans, Thoreau’s body is the primary instrument he used in his experiment with living in relative isolation in nature. Walden is at rock bottom the Chronicle of Thoreau’s body’s trajectory through the woods.”

Last quote by Perillo: “When the legs become unreliable one loses a large portion of the world. I get tired of the word accessible. The idea that the world must be reworked for my benefit.” So those are just some of her thoughts on Emerson and Thoreau and her kind of dialogue that she's opening up with him and pointing out the underlying assumptions in their work. Next slide please.

So the next assignment that I have students do is put these nature writers in conversation. Just asking them to consider their philosophies and how they might interact with each other. Next slide please. So some examples of student letters from that is they've really picked up on the main philosophies that are being addressed. So they mostly choose to write to Edward Abbey from Lucia Perillo and ask him to consider her perspective. So an example of this student writing is that the ability to experience nature is diverse and personal:

“It seems that you can only experience and appreciate nature when it is overwhelming. The true outdoorsman would appreciate the mundane aspects of nature and the aspects so seemingly underwhelming that they could easily be missed. I appreciate your opinions and experiences as a writer, however, my experience with MS has changed my perspective. I hope that you will try to learn to see and appreciate nature where you may not have thought it existed.” So, just challenging that idea that the wilder the better the nature here in America. Next slide please.

So this is another example. Some students chose to write from Lucia Perillo to Edward Abbey. Calling out his closed-minded approach to nature and those who wish to experience it, and reminding him that not everyone has the same embodied experience he does. Next slide.

And then in the final assignment, it's a peripatetic walk, just considering everything we've learned throughout the semester. So I asked them to again walk around campus in the way that they have available and consider the ways that human construction helps or hinders people with disabilities. How do aspects of the built and managed environment reflect ideas expressed in the social model of disability. How do you view your environment differently after having read Perillo and other authors with disabilities and articles on social versus medical models of disability. How or where do you see the built environment in social attitudes contributing to systemic barriers for people with disabilities, and how have your attitudes changed? Next slide please.

And then the final presentations, I allow students just to take wherever their own interest lies. I've had students with disabilities kind of create evaluations of trails that are supposedly accessible and rating how accessible they actually are. And then some students just choose to write about the nature around them. So I consider any of that as success as long as they're showing reflection on these underpinnings of the nature writing movement. Observing what's around them, but with this added layer of how do we make nature more accessible to everyone to get at that democratic idea where it does belong to all of us? What does that actually mean? When it's put into practice so.

I think I'm almost out of time, so thank you for attending today. It was my pleasure to talk about this with you and I hope to hear your questions e-mailed, so thank you.

**Alison Whiting:** Thank you so much, Julie.

All right. Thank you to all of our speakers this hour. We are so grateful you were able to join us today. This has been hugely enlightening. We will take a short break now and our next session will start at 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time. See you all soon.