

Place in Poetry

Target Academic Level: High School & College

Lesson Overview:

After reading *Ashore* in its entirety, students will look closely at the following poems: “Waimea Valley I”, “Waimea Valley II”, and “Waimea Valley III” all based in Hawaii, as well as “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment” (from “Ode for my Montana Grandmother”) and “Catalog”, both based in Montana. These poems will be examined closely to enter a discussion about establishing and using place in poetry.

Before Lecture:

In a brief class discussion, ask students to identify lines, words, and images throughout the selected poems that establish a sense of place, focusing on the differences between the poems based in Hawaii versus those based in Montana.

Lecture:

There are different ways of establishing a sense of place within a poem-- in Nakanishi’s poems, she uses:

- Inclusion of flora and fauna specific to the place that is being written from or about.
 - For example:
 - In “Waimea Valley I”: “red lehua plucked and plucked again.”, “Moss has colonized the road,” and “the bird chirrup.”
 - In “Waimea Valley II”: “pohaku and iwi,” and “Kalo dries on bowed stalks.”
 - In “Waimea Valley III”: “the loulou palms with skirts of crackling leaves,” “the bird with a branded face and backward steps,” “how she walked over the lily pads,” “how bromeliads love the mango bark,” “ironwood, strawberry guava and grass,” “The seedlings of lama,/ wiliwili, and koa cast down roots.”
 - In “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment”: “Her memory is an azalea,” “It is the honeysuckle we press to our lips,” “snow has pocked/ with the brown husks of seeds.”, “the last of the beech.”
 - In “Catalog”: “Grizzly,” “Tamarack, still frilled in lichen.”, “Buffalo,” “Black Bear,” “She lassos the sweet grass with her tongue,” “Wolf.”

- The usage of figurative language that includes words and images that point towards the place being written from or about.
 - For example:
 - In “Waimea Valley I”: “Moss has colonized the road/ in green islands.”
 - In “Waimea Valley II”: “Kalo dries on bowed stalks, the soft-veined/ hearts calling out for living water”
 - In “Waimea Valley III”: “The ‘ohi’a ‘ai,/ ohi’a lehua, and alahe’e reach into the sky.”, “They will catch the clouds above the old stream beds/ and pull down the rain.”
 - In “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment”: “Her memory is an azalea, uprooted.”, “It is the honeysuckle we press to our lips/ and bite: vegetable tang/ and the sweet cup.”, “I see reams of printer paper/ unrolling all down the hillside, but softer,/ made love to our eyes.”, “the last of the beech/ leaves hanging on through winter/ in their own withered boats.”
 - In “Catalog”: “She moves/ as if pushing the earth in front of her,” “the deep caves of their eyes.”, “She lassos the sweet grass with her tongue,/ heavy with seed.”

- Description or imagery of weather patterns and geological features that are specific to the place being written about or from.
 - For example:
 - In “Waimea Valley I”: “The rain comes as a blessing and often,” “Kamananui stream,” “the tender sky,” “Gusts of wind loosen fruits/ high in the canopy,” “We walk along/ the paved way right up to the pool/ and water falling-- Wailele,” “And once it dried completely./ The stream bed cracked, the pool sunk.”
 - In “Waimea Valley II”: “Alive, Hale Iwi/ and those original lo’i walls, over 200 years old/ rising up Kaluahole ridge.”
 - In “Waimea Valley III”: “They will catch the clouds above the old stream beds/ and pull down the rain.”
 - In “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment”: “snow has pocked/ with the brown husks of seeds.”, “I see reams of printer paper/ unrolling all down the hillside, but softer,” “the last of the beech/ leaves hanging on through winter.”

- The differing usage of word choice that establishes the tone in each poem, which shows the speaker’s relationship to each place.

- For example:
 - In “Waimea Valley I”: “blessing”, “tender”, “ripens”, “green” (implies fertility, abundance, softness, fondness)
 - In “Waimea Valley II”: “sacred”, “Refuge”, “alive”, “shrine”, “rising”, “soft-veined”, “living”, “wild abundance” (implies sacredness, gentleness, aliveness, plentifulness, wildness)
 - In “Waimea Valley III”: “I’ve been saving this in my mind for you,” “love”, “seedling”, “reach” (implies the place itself is a gift to be given, fondness and love for, potentiality, growth)
 - In “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment”: “uprooted”, “bite”, “tang”, “pocked”, “withered”, “hanging” (implies a toughness, darkness, coldness, destruction)
 - In “Catalog”: “tsunami”, “pushing”, “massive”, “hollow”, “mass”, “dark blue”, “huge”, “suspended”, “dark cords of muscle”, “lassos”, “heavy” (implies heaviness, forcefulness, intimidating, darkness, destructiveness)

Post-Lecture Discussion Questions:

1. What impact does the inclusion of a specific place have on your experience of these poems?
2. How are different elements of craft used within these poems to establish a sense of place?
3. What effect does the inclusion of place have on your relationship to the poem’s speaker?
4. Are there any other ways that Nakanishi established a sense of place in *Ashore* that you noticed?
5. What craft elements and techniques might you use to include place in your own work?

Writing Prompts:

1. As discussed, the inclusion of place-specific flora and fauna plays a large role in Nakanishi’s poems. Take some time to remember (or, better yet, research) the fauna and flora specific to where you are from. Use what you find in a poem about a memory you have in your hometown. Remember, you can include these specific details literally, or use them as images and figurative language in your poem.
2. In the “Waimea Valley” series, you might have noticed that Nakanishi uses language specific to Hawaii. Does your hometown have a specific language or jargon you remember hearing? Does your family speak a different language at home? Use place-specific language that you’ve observed in your personal experience in a poem.

3. In “Mid-Winter, a Lucid Moment”, the land, weather, and plants of Montana serve as a figurative representation of the speaker’s experience of their grandmother’s memory loss. Use the plants, animals, and weather patterns of your home to figuratively describe an experience that you’ve had there-- it could be an experience of loss, like in Nakanishi’s poem, or a happy memory.