DISCUSSION QUESTIONS from Milkweed Press for Ecology of a Cracker Childhood (and some answers – a little help for faculty)
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1. In *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* Janisse Ray alternates memoir with natural history. Did you find this effective? What benefits/limitations does this way of communication impose?

There may be students who don’t know what “Natural History” means. My working definition: the study of living things, their physical description (perhaps in some cases genetic composition), behaviors, and interactions. It is not a “dead” field which is what some online sources will say. There are active journals and societies that study Natural History (i.e., Southeastern Naturalist).

2. Throughout *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* Janisse Ray explores what a younger generation takes and rejects from its elders: The differences between Charlie Ray (her grandfather) and Franklin Ray (her father) are in vivid contrast; Ray herself does not share her mother’s interests and concerns. Discuss these differences and compare them to your own experiences with your parents.

- Ray describes her grandfather as being a “wild man” and one who “knew the woods by heart” (p. 39), but also one who was “poor at providing” (p. 40) and left the family after a period of mental illness (p. 54). While Ray’s father also suffered from mental illness, his devotion to his family is very different from his father’s. Her grandfather was not religious (p. 107), but her father was extremely religious. Her grandfather found nature to be extremely important, her father valued it in a different way (p. 128).
- Ray’s mother is emotionally strong, but very traditional. She believes she is her husband’s “helpmate” (p. 193) and prides herself on keeping a clean house, cooking and caring for her family – with no ambition for herself. Even at an early age, Ray begins to disdain cooking and cleaning and by her teen years was called a “tomboy” by her mother and sister (p. 203).

3. At the end of the chapter titled “Iron Man,” Janisse Ray asks, “Of what use to humanity . . . is a man who cannot see beyond his own hurt?” What has she learned from her grandfather? What do we realize she expects of humanity?

Clearly you could put this in a broader context, but in the context of the book, I believe Ray wanted more knowledge about the swamp and pinelands from her grandfather, she wanted him to talk about his childhood and share what he knew. She felt a part of being in a society is to share knowledge.

4. Janisse Ray eloquently describes being in an old-growth forest. She drinks it “like water,” she feels “mortality’s roving hands grapple with air,” she sees her “place as human in a natural order more grand, whole and functional than [she’s] ever witnessed,” and is “humbled, not frightened.” Why does she feel that she “no longer [has] to worry about what happens to souls”? (p. 69)

I suspect this could be answered from a number of different perspectives, but the most basic would be that she feels she is integrated into nature. From my perspective, her words sound like she has a pantheist outlook on religion in the Thoreau/Emerson/Rachel Carson vein (nature and god are one), but
she also speaks as God as an entity (perhaps because of her Christian background). Other interesting quotes on religion and the environment:

- “For me, the chance to be simply a young mammal roaming the woods did not exist” (p. 121)
- “If you clear a forest, you’d better pray continuously” (p. 123)
- “God doesn’t like a clear-cut. It makes his heart turn cold, makes him wince and wonder what went wrong with his creation, and sets him to thinking about what spoils the child” (p. 123).
- “God likes to prop himself against a tree in the forest and study the plants and animals. They all please him” (pgs. 125-6).

5. Consider Franklin Ray’s (Janisse Ray’s father) attitude toward the natural world and his influence on Ray. How have your own parents influenced your views of nature?

While Franklin Ray wasn’t anti-environmental, Janisse Ray said he didn’t seem to value nature or wild areas in general. “Nature wasn’t ill regarded, it was superfluous. Nature got in the way” (p. 128), however, he had strong feelings towards hurt animals. For example, when he accidentally stopped on a toad, he tried to sew it up (p. 129), when a neighbor killed a snapping turtle he was very angry (p. 132) and when he found an injured green heron, he took him home, tried to heal him and made a home for him near a pond (136-138). Clearly Ray values the entire ecosystem from the individual species to complex community relationships.

6. What do you think of Janisse Ray’s portrayal of her father’s mental illness and its effect on the family? Is it effective? Is she able to be objective? What do you think of the way mental illness was perceived and handled in that time and place?

- Janisse Ray mention’s that Charlie Ray (grand father) was mentally ill, indicating a genetic link (p. 41, 52). In the “Junkyard” chapter (pgs. 71-80) she talks about how she usually felt when her father was suffering from depression he was “simply unavailable to me” p. 78. She also includes a letter that her father wrote her as an adult about his illness where he says he values his experiences while ill and disagrees with the Church’s interpretation of mental illness being “the devil” p. 79.
- When her father had a major breakdown (p. 92) the family suspected it was a combination of a hit of LSD and his predisposition to mental illness
- While earlier she said she was “unaffected” by her father’s illness, when her father locked her mother and all 4 kids into the backroom, it seems to be a very traumatic event for her and everyone else (pgs. 93-95).

7. Before you read Ecology of a Cracker Childhood, did you have any preconceptions about the word “cracker”? What do you understand about this term now? How does Ray’s identification with “cracker” culture and her pride in her heritage affect her understanding of ecology?

Janisse Ray gives these two potential sources for the word “Cracker” to describe poor Southern whites on p. 82:

- “A possible derivation of the term comes from its meaning boaster, braggart; hence, a liar, as when Shakespeare writes, [What cracker is this same that deafe our eares with this abundance of superfluous breath...].]”
• “the name came from the settlers’ cracking of whips over teams of oxen or mules or even for their habit of eating their corn cracked.”

Janisse Ray says she realizes she is a “Southerner, a slow, dumb, redneck hick, a hayseed, inbred and racist, come from poverty, condemned to poverty...” In college, she tries to lose her accent and hide her background. Later, in early adulthood she comes to terms with her background and realizes that “what I come from has made me who I am”(pgs. 30-33)

8. Using the example of the farmer with the captive gopher tortoise, discuss the compromises and efforts that humans must employ in order to understand an opposing point of view. Does Ray criticize, excuse, or defend the behavior she witnesses in the rural south?

The incident of the gopher tortoise is described in “The Keystone” chapter (pgs. 167-173). Ray tries to get the farmer (fruit seller) to release the tortoise by first explaining it will die in his wagon, then saying it is an endangered species and the wildlife officer will give him a fine. Finally her father, a friend of the fruit-seller (farmer) convinces him to release it.

9. How do faith and intellect equally influence Janisse Ray’s life as she grows up? How does the conflict or juxtaposition of these two ways of looking at the world shape her appreciation of her personal ecology?

I found this to be a difficult answer to articulate. As Ray describes in the “Heaven on Earth” chapter, religion dominated her life out of school. However, in the “Light” chapter and others, she also speaks about her love of school and reading. Clearly as an adult she is not a practicing Fundamentalist Christian, but she still talks about God. When she talks about the environment in the Natural History sections of her book, she does so with a combination of scientific accuracy and poetry.

10. While Janisse Ray never sees a longleaf pine until adulthood, she describes the “opening of her heart” when as a child she does a school project on carnivorous plants. Was there a time in your own life from which you can trace a similar development of understanding?

A species of pitcher plant (Sarracenia minor) growing in the corner of the junkyard was one of the things that opened Ray Ray’s heart and perhaps signifies the beginning of strong interest in natural history. The plants show her the importance of rain and soil and how ecosystems function. The phrase “opening of the heart” comes from the Albert Camus’ quote “A man’s work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened” (p. 127).

11. Scars are an often-repeated image in Ecology of a Cracker Childhood: her own childhood hurts, her father’s attempts to heal animals, clear-cut forests, initials carved into a tree. Why does Ray use this recurring theme?

• “One canal that ran behind the junkyard seemed to go for miles. The scars of its construction were softened by the wear of time, canal sides no longer perpendicular, rushes and cattails returned, layers of leaves..” (p. 59)
A man calls Ray Ray’s father and says “I’ve got a piece of tree here....with CJ Ray cared in it and the year 1928. Right above that is has my daddy’s initials and the year 1918. “ (p. 264). Ray Ray’s father rescues the wood (that was being cut) and brings it home. Ray Ray writes “Scars bear testimony to occupation, to event, but not to circumstances; to phenomena but not conditions”. (p. 264).

12. Ray states, “Culture springs from the actions of people in a landscape.” If we “look around,” as she suggests, “and see that the landscape that defined us no longer exists [and] that animals that adapted as we adapted” are dying out (p. 271), what does this say about the interaction between culture and the natural world?

Ray feels that the loss of the forest is also the loss of our heritage as we move further from being connected to the land.