

WORD/IMAGE/OBJECT/SCAPE: Final Assessment

Spring 2011

“World, Word, Work: Translating Experience into Art through Lyric, Image & Object In the Studio, Lab, Atelier, Field & Gallery: a cross-disciplinary study”

Participants:

Katrina Roberts (coordinator), *English*

Don Snow, *Environmental Humanities*

Mare Blocker, *Art*

Michelle Acuff, *Art*

Mission:

If, as William Carlos Williams says, “Perception is the first act of the imagination,” then we should all pack up our journals, our paints and lab kits, and tromp out into the field together. What we (a group of colleagues from Studio Art, from Environmental Studies, and from the Department of English) intend to do during the Spring term is to see with each other's eyes, to understand how inspiration happens, to translate this world and our experiences within it into new languages for ourselves and for others. We're interested in the "made thing," and the "natural thing," and how they inform one another. And we're also drawn toward discovering and comparing languages necessary to invent, to transcribe, to remember, to invoke, to define, within our own genres and those of others. Following Englehard's eco-poetic notion that poetry is connected to the world in a way that implies responsibility, we're invested as poets, naturalists, and artists in becoming aware of our connectivity with and distances from others, and in devising ways to expand the scope of our individual visions, thereby strengthening our ability to be engaged members of a global community. As artists, editors, and poets at heart, we're passionate about how the personal is political, and the political personal. The creative process is by necessity cross-disciplinary, and we are hoping to formalize this engagement. We relish the possibility of inspiring conversations and sessions with colleagues similarly interested in challenging and enriching pedagogical and scholarly practices with the techniques, textures, and visions of experts and practitioners across our campus.

Overview:

Our collective met throughout the spring term, moving as the creative spirit moved us from location to location, from idea to tangential idea, seeing what might emerge as we travelled proverbially in each others shoes -- so that we dwelled in various moments in the Book Arts Lab in Fouts, or in the Sheehan Gallery in Olin, or in an Environmental Humanities seminar room, or in various cafés around town, as well as in a final meander -- floating together down the Hanford Reach of the Columbia River.

We followed poetic drifts and explored thematic currents as they availed themselves (grateful to be invited to participate, for instance, in the First Foods discussion – an event that availed itself to us here on campus rather than requiring us to make the trip Don suggested below); prompted in another instance to contemplate the metaphoric work of Emmet Gowin (a photographer whose aerial photos inspire consideration of human impacts on nature) in contrast to the provocative text we encountered together midway through (*The World Without Us*), that accentuates the magnitude and duration of the natural world we inhabit. Each participant introduced creative works of his/her own, as well as critical texts for framing and provocation – essays by Wendell Berry, monographs by Deborah Butterfield and others, etc.

And each participant contributed in a range of ways – directing a weekly session, or leading a journey through provocative terrain (metaphoric or other) to address intertwining themes that emerged about our interactions as artists, writers, human beings with the “natural” and constructed worlds we inhabit and create. We initiated several collaborative projects for further potential development – for instance a renga (inspired in part by the book-length travelling/environmental poetic sequence *Crossing State Lines: An American Renga*) that may become part of a collective book arts project/piece for a fall show Mare’s been invited to curate as well as a sequence of “plates” we inscribed both on and off the river. Each one of us has valued that creative provocation of these interactions, and we’re dedicated to continuing our collaborations despite the project’s formal end.

Moreover, each one of us has appreciated the many ways in which our pedagogical thinking has been transformed based on our interactions, and each one of us has already implemented important changes in upcoming courses. Our discussions have prompted us to augment our teaching methods -- such that I, for instance, have included a crucial “nature journaling” segment in an upper level workshop I’m teaching this fall; in addition, I’ve invited a prominent poet and editor (of the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*), to participate in the upcoming season of the Visiting Writers Reading Series.

Though our work is inherently interdisciplinary in and of itself, we have greatly valued the ways in which we’ve been able to connect even more wholly and formally this spring across our small liberal arts campus with other equally busy, passionate colleagues -- to spin more tightly threads already existing, to tease out and unravel new ideas, and to begin to untangle and introduce compelling political and aesthetic knots. I appreciate the many perspectives my colleagues offer below in their personal reflections. We’re grateful to the college for providing such a valuable initiative into collaborative work for us both in and beyond our classrooms – providing the gift of time that has enriched our vision as individual creators as well as in our capacities as professors. – Katrina Roberts

Participants’ Reflections:

My Spring 2011 participation in the Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative with cohorts Katrina Roberts, Don Snow and Mare Blocker yielded many fruitful insights into our creative processes as authors/artists/teachers, as well as contributed greatly to my own deepening understanding of the surrounding landscape of the Inland Northwest. These interactions functioned as a medium for me to engage with colleagues with whom I already feel an affinity of subject matter or style, yet often do not have the luxury of encountering in the day-to-day space of the academic year. Opening up time to actually sit with each other and each other's works, even briefly, was tremendously rewarding in itself.

These conversations and provocations--and the myriad avenues they sent me down in my own pursuit of connection across disciplines--helped me to understand more fully the issues my own work raises, in addition to seeing how similar concerns arise through other media in the work of my colleagues.

Along our often circuitous and organic route we came across the book *The World Without Us*, parts of which I have already adapted in a prompt for the final assignment of my Spring 2011 Beginning Drawing course, in which students were to create drawings of the Whitman landscape. I used the book to stimulate student dialogue around the imaginative notion of what our campus might look like, centuries from now. I urged them to draw upon whatever other course and/or major content that might help generate an image of this future, one most certainly ecologically, technically, materially and socially distinct from our own.

For me, this was emblematic of our group's dynamic in general, in which we stretched ourselves to understand and connect sundry bits of information from each other's discipline. This summer I plan to develop a stronger project around environmental issues for my Intermediate Sculpture class, as well as to consider ways poems might function as prompts for sculptures and vice-versa.

I continue to be fueled by many of these discussions, and cherish the place we found to think and work in collaboration. While formal meetings will no longer be required of us, I anticipate many future conversations, gatherings and works, and remain grateful for what has been set in motion... -- Michelle Acuff

Perhaps the most important aspect of this workshop for me was the opportunity for community building. All of our group members came to the workshop with an interdisciplinary mindset in place. I had previously built strong ties with Katrina due to our ongoing broadside project for the Visiting Writers Reading Series, and I feel this workshop has strengthened those ties. I anticipate working with her on personal projects in the future. The all day raft trip really allowed me to know and understand Don and Michelle on a deeper personal level than possible in previous campus

interactions. I see all of them as resources I can call on now, to further strengthen our programs, and am thankful for this gift.

I have two exhibitions of my work scheduled for the fall and this workshop has influenced both of them. The first invitational is a new trends in fibers show with an emphasis in mapping. The second is a book arts exhibit, in conjunction with Maya Lin's Confluence project, that I am co-curating. I am planning on featuring collaborative pieces, possibly including work from our workshop.

Many of the readings we did this term have influenced my new work, and I find that I am continuing along this vein this summer. I am especially taken with Leslie Silko and David James Duncan's work, which Don introduced me to. I even planted my garden a bit differently this year, based on a reading and the lecture, about the First Foods, First Nations Calendar.

I think an important aspect of teaching at a school like Whitman is the opportunity for the students to view the work process, and outcome of the professor. The themes we studied and discussed this term have slipped into my work, which reflects my commitment to interdisciplinary studies.

This term I was directly inspired by our workshop to alter the syllabus for my intermediate and advanced book arts class to reflect a more interdisciplinary approach in the collaborative project's content. The class read a book on the natural history of color, and each person designed and printed a signature based on their assigned color. The books were then collated and each student bound their copy of the book utilizing a personal aesthetic. The class felt this project was successful and enjoyed reading the text. One of the most interesting aspects that arose from the project was a class discussion on colonization and the exploitation of the resources of developing countries. I anticipate assigning more projects using this style of interdisciplinary research in the future. – Mare Blocker

Some Thoughts on Interdisciplinary Teaching, with gratitude to the Dean for bringing this program into being.

First, to say this: Our group (Katrina, Mare, Michelle, and myself) offered, to me, a strong and encouraging reinforcement of trust – of trusting students, in particular. It so happened that as our group met during Spring Semester, Mare and I were working together on one of the most satisfying senior thesis projects I have had in my years at Whitman. Env. Humanities major Lara Mehling produced an interdisciplinary, multi-media work of stunning quality, titled "Twelve Moons: A Seasonal Round for the New West." To describe Lara's project as a combination of book arts and writing is accurate but pale. Her project embodied, captured the essence of what our interdisciplinary group was trying to do, at least from my perspective. All that Lara needed to complete this remarkable project was sufficient trust on the part of her thesis committee. As she went along, the project became more a book-arts project and

less a writing project. She seemed concerned, at one point, that I, as her primary adviser, might insist that she stay closer to her original proposal, which involved much more writing, but I did not do so, in part because of my recognizing the extraordinary support of her studio arts adviser, Mare. It took me very little time to realize that Lara needed nothing more than freedom and trust. My work with the interdisciplinary group helped enable that position.

But our group's efforts had broader effects as well – at least on my thinking about teaching within the context of Environmental Studies and Environmental Humanities.

Our group had set out – one central idea, anyway – to reflect on the heavily altered landscapes of eastern Washington, noting the functions of time and cultures.

In my response to Katrina's mission statement, I suggested the following (quoted here, as above, from early e-mail exchanges):

Two field trips, one of which would be a long day (if we can pull it off), which would focus on the themes of alteration/restoration:

1. A trip to the Umatilla Reservation, which I mentioned earlier, to inspect for ourselves the manner in which the tribes there have recently re-ordered their Natural Resources program around the seasonal/topographical cycles of nutrition. This trip would depend on the good will of Umatilla tribal officials both within and outside of the Tamastlikt museum. I have seen one very fine presentation there by the head of the tribal natural resources agency, Eric Quaetemps, which then enabled students and profs to gain a richer insight into some of the exhibits out in the museum halls and made far more meaningful our later visit to a salmon (and lamprey!) recovery site on the S. Fork. Something like this trip might be repeated for our little group.

So Trip 1 might make for one really interesting bracket for the theme of alteration/restoration. Here's another possible bracket:

2. A day-long raft float trip down the Hanford Reach of the Columbia. It's a mind-blowing landscape: on the right bank as you proceed, the dead and inert reactors and processing buildings left over from the Manhattan Project. A few of these Soviet-looking structures are RIGHT THERE. On the left bank, a wildlife preserve, created accidentally by virtue of the thick veil of privacy and security that surrounded Hanford (and still does) for decades. Pelicans and plutonium -- it makes for quite a viewing experience.

In the midst of our deliberations across the semester, we were lucky to learn that Kay Fenimore-Smith's group had invited Eric Quaetemps from the Reservation to give his "First Foods" presentation on campus, and Kay generously invited other interested groups. Our group attended. I found at that time that the book Michelle's suggested

for us to read, Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us*, was quite apt and illuminating. I kept reading and found that Weisman's commentaries set us up nicely for the Hanford float, Pelicans & Plutonium, a few days after Commencement (May 25).

All the while – all semester, really – I had been thinking about two pedagogical arenas: first, because I was also informally attending the Env. Studies interdisciplinary group, organized by Tim Parker, I was pondering anew the role of the Environmental Humanities within the context of the Whitman E.S. Program. Secondly, I had my mind on the new summer program, Whitman in the Willows, which I had been planning to teach in partnership with Delbert Hutchison and our colleagues at Willows Resources, a non-profit in Enterprise, OR.

Deliberations among our group led by Katrina helped carry my thinking forward in the following ways:

1. I set to work on a memo written for my colleagues in ES, suggesting ways to refine and enhance interdisciplinarity in our gateway course, ES 120 (Introduction to Environmental Studies). Interestingly, what my participation in the two I-groups together made clear to me was why, when I have taught ES 120 in the past, I made no effort to create interdisciplinary “units” in the course, and seldom spoke with students about varying “perspectives” on environmental matters. Instead, I approached the course spatially, temporally, and institutionally: space had to do with a given landscape (in ES 120 with its weekly field trips, the landscape is local, as laboratory); time involves the history of the conservation-environmental movement, beginning in the 19th century; institutionalization has to do with efforts to make environmentalism mainstream (and problems and obstacles that have been encountered as this effort has proceeded). What became much clearer to me, as a result of both I-groups, is why I have long resisted thinking about ES 120, and ENVIS at large, as enterprises being divided among the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. My vocabulary on the nature of this resistance is thus improving.

And it took a turn for the better just this week when I ran across a piece by Stanley Fish in the *New York Times*. Commenting on a new anthology, *GeoHumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place*, Fish takes note of an essay therein that describes a “critical shift that divested geography of its largely passive role as history’s ‘stage’ and brought to the fore intersections between the humanities and the earth sciences.” Fish then comments:

“Intersections” is perhaps too weak a word, because it suggests two disciplines that retain their distinctiveness but collaborate occasionally on a specific project. The stronger assertion, made by many in the volume, is that the division between empirical/descriptive disciplines and interpretive disciplines is itself a fiction and one that stands in the way of the production of knowledge.

2. Deliberations with Katrina's group in particular helped me put the final touches on my portion of the team-taught Whitman in the Wallowas pilot course, in progress as I write here. It had been my idea to name the 2011 program "A Wallowa County Almanac" and to organize the entire course around the reading of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Reflecting on conversations within our interdisciplinary group gave me confidence to move forward with a (risky) plan to have the students, at the end of WITW, assemble "A Wallowa County Almanac" from their writings, field journals, and art works. Again, the questions in my mind all revolved around trust, freedom, and creativity.

3. I am eager to begin working with Kate Shea, our new hire in EH-Classics. Kate is a highly creative teacher and scholar, but she has never taught within the context of an environmental studies program. Whitman's decision to bring a Classics scholar into our young EH program brings a great deal of innovation and excitement, along with an opportunity to think afresh about the environmental humanities.

On this count, I have gained an enormous benefit from our deliberations in the artists-writers interdisciplinary group, and I am now in the process of drafting several memos and reflections in how we might think to strengthen the EH major in light of a more refined understanding of cross-disciplinary teaching.