

CDLTI Report
Post-Natural Histories of the Rural West
Spring 2014

Our workshop brought together faculty from Anthropology, Art History and Critical Visual Studies, English, Politics, and Studio art to explore connections between the arts and Environmental Studies.

For more than twenty years Whitman College's Environmental Studies program has excelled at place-based studies of regional Nature and natural resources. As our region careens through the new millennium, however, it is clear that foundational categories of our program require radical reworking. Our group came together around the belief a growing number of scholars, artists, and activists engaging with the geographies of the rural West in ways that blur the boundary between the arts and social sciences offer an exciting way forward.

Traditional conceptions of Nature as existing separate from society fail in a time when invisible radionuclides from nuclear accidents remake "wild" life forms, genetically modified organisms drift across landscapes, and human-driven climate change forecloses on the possibility of Edenic restoration. "Nature" no longer captures the complexity of relations between human and non-human entities (if it ever did).

At the same time, the relentless creative destruction of capitalism has remade "the rural" in ways that strain against Environmental Studies' regional place-based lens. The rural, as Raymond Williams observed, has always been constituted through its relations with other places—particularly cities. In the 21st century, his relational understanding of the rural West has only grown more important. To be rural in the contemporary American West today, is to be defined by global capital, intimately connected with urban socio-natural systems.

With this in mind, our group met six times for two hours during the Spring 2014 semester, and, at the end of May, took a day-long field trip to raft the Hanford Reach of the Columbia River.

Not surprisingly, the workshop did not result in grand conclusions about the nature of Nature in the present moment, but it did have considerable impact on each of us. The individual commentaries at the end of this report attest to this, but three general outcomes are worth noting:

(1) The workshop empowered each faculty member to begin using new types of materials in their teaching. For example, while the social scientists in the group had long wanted to use fiction, poetry, and art pieces in their courses, they rarely did. As they admitted during our workshop discussions, they avoided including creative works in their classes, because they were uncertain *how* to teach that kind of material. The workshop changed this by giving social science faculty a chance to see

how faculty from English and Art structured a class session and led discussion about creative works. In general, workshop participants came out of it feeling more confident about teaching a broader range of material in their classes.

(2) The workshop continued lay the groundwork for discussions about the place of the Arts in Environmental Studies. It is not clear what form collaboration may take in the future, but the workshop confirmed participants' sense of the important role that questions of nature-culture are playing in the Arts today. And it identified considerable benefits to be gained by expanding understandings of Environmental Studies to include the Arts more centrally.

(3) The workshop shaped the trajectory of each participant's professional work in distinct ways. In particular, several participants noted that the workshop pushed them to try out new methods or formats in their work.

Workshop Syllabus

Meeting 1

Workshop introduction and discussion of several broad, framing texts led by Aaron Bobrow-Strain.

Meeting 2

Led by Phil Brick, this discussion centered on the concept of the "Anthropocene."

Meeting 3

Led by Michelle Acuff, this session combined slideshow, lecture, and discussion to examine the history of visual art's engagements with questions of nature.

Meeting 4

Led by Nicole Pietrantoni, this session continued the previous discussion, focusing on concepts of beauty and landscape.

Meeting 5

Led by Jason Pribilsky, this discussion drew off several excellent ethnographic accounts of the intertwining of race, nature, and rural poverty in the American West.

Meeting 6

Led by Scott Elliot, we examined a series of short stories and poems that reflected out workshop themes.

Meeting 7

Capstone field trip. The capstone field trip was a highlight of the workshop for many of us. This stretch of the river runs through the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. As a result, it has never been dammed or developed (beyond the reactor facilities), making it the last such section of the Columbia. It is simultaneously a site of

“pristine” wilderness and Cold War nuclear devastation that perfectly, a juxtaposition that crystallized many of the themes we had discussed over the semester. Because the rafting was not particularly challenging, the experience was, in effect, an 8-hour-long floating seminar—enhanced by the participation of two additional ES faculty (Snow and Corder) with tremendous knowledge of the site.

Participant Reflections

Michelle Acuff

The subject of "Nature as the externally conditioning frame for human life," (Swyngedouw) is one deeply present to me in my own work as an artist. I labor daily to articulate in material/visual terms this tangled web of relations we now know as the Anthropocene. This semester's conversations allowed me to gain insight into a wider spectrum of disciplinary stances on this subject, but more importantly it allowed me to imagine a multi-disciplinary *practice* in relation to said content. It allowed me to see the potential for individual research, literature, image and object making to cohere in new ways, to see the intellectual and artistic capital generated at Whitman *as material*. Participation in this CDTLI sets the stage, at the very least intellectually, if not also in reality, for a larger project of a slightly different format in which several angles are taken on how we engage with the New West. The object and product of such an endeavor would be something more formal, concrete even: a document, an image archive, a work of art and/or all of the above, the edges of which would be indistinguishable. This is the new stone being pushed upward for me.

Aaron Bobrow-Strain

The workshop impacted me on a number of levels. In the most immediate sense, it exposed me to new texts (written, visual, and otherwise) that helped me think about my courses in new ways. Nearly every text in the workshop was relevant to Prof. Acuff and my cross-disciplinary course Raw Geographies. The experience inspired lots of thoughts about how to improve that course. I have also added a new section to my Political Ecology course filled with material inspired by the workshop. In terms of my own scholarship, the workshop coincided with sabbatical and the preliminary stages of research on a new book project. My project is not “environmental” in any traditional sense, but the workshop experience has deeply shaped it. It’s got me paying much more attention to the way that histories of race and political economy get sedimented in the land. And it’s made me much more sensitive to the spirited roles that these social-natural processes play in the politics of the rural Arizona border town I’m studying. For example, drawing inspiration from the workshop, I’ve investigated the way that dust laden with arsenic, lead, and cadmium (kicked up by hundreds of Border Patrol vehicles) crystallizes multiple, contradictory affective reactions to stepped-up enforcement: it impacts health and generates anger, and feeling of powerlessness. It also triggers a complex kind of mourning. The dust reminds locals of a time when copper smelting poisoned the land and deepened environmental injustices, but also created the foundation for the

rare effervescence of a Mexican-American middle class. Seeing dust as a site of socio-natural politics has opened up a whole route into understanding the complex ways that locals respond to stepped up border enforcement. I am grateful to the workshop and my colleagues for making me more sensitive to these kinds of socio-natural dynamics.

Phil Brick

The most valuable part of the workshop for me was the chance to learn what others outside of my Division are reading/thinking when it comes to the West and its (post) natural history. For example, I had never come across the work of Lucy Lipard, assigned by Nicole Pietrantonio. I plan to use parts of her *Lure of the Local* text for Semester in the West this fall. It was also great to learn about Nicole's own work on climate change and we've had several conversations about how we might develop an experience for students that could build on this mutual interest. Another important aspect of our meetings were informal conversations, where I learned about Tanka poetry, also from Nicole. This fall, I will be requiring my SITW students to write and read Tanka poems to document their experiences on the program. Similarly, Scott Elliott assigned several western writers I did know, and he provided a fresh perspective on more familiar writers such as Barry Lopez. I plan to assign one or two of these stories to SITW students this fall. I feel much more confident doing so after listening to how Scott interprets them.

Scott Elliott

Participation in the CDLTI sessions brought into clearer focus a number of ideas with which I had not engaged in so much complexity. Discussions in this CDLTI made me consider more carefully what separates the West from other regions, the degree to which any writing or thinking about the West requires a separation of the romantic and mythic from the real, and how difficult it is to achieve that separation. The discussions also challenged easy aesthetic stances and judgments, and reinforced the difficulty of neatly demarcating divisions between the human and the natural, the city and the country. It did a good job of showcasing the way a number of different scholars and artists have found to engage with difficult questions and pressing problems like climate change. The colloquium also brought into clearer focus the complexity of the idea of the Anthropocene as a lens through which to consider the here-and-now and the future of the American West, if not humanity at large. It's impossible to say how, exactly, these discussions will affect my teaching and scholarship going forward, but it's safe to speculate that an awareness of these complexities will position me to write about the American West in ways that acknowledge the complexities of the present and the future as I might not have if I hadn't had the chance to consider the different approaches of my colleagues and the texts/works they asked us to consider. All of our discussions made us either unmask the route by which a present moment (or idea) has been made or look to the future, in some cases a traumatic or mind-bending one. Of course, awareness and good grappling in the scholarship and art, leads to a livelier, more up-to-date engagement in the classroom. Since our students will live farther into this future and have more

at stake in it, the better awareness of (and more informed) facing up to that future, which facing up has been engendered by this colloquium, I'd speculate has brought me closer to my students' realities (perhaps realities to which they have not yet been fully awakened) and position me to better help them face up to the complexities of and to ask good questions about and explore creative approaches to the most difficult problems human beings face on this planet.

Nicole Pietrantonio

The readings and conversation were particularly stimulating to me not only because my artistic research intersects with these areas, but I would like to incorporate cross-disciplinary materials into the studio art classroom. Students in my classes struggle for content and ideas to make their art *about*, and I too struggle to make clear prompts that push them to think critically about their position or the place they live. That said, the workshop encouraged me to try a new assignment in my book arts class this semester where every student drew/collaged/printed a map exploring a social, cultural, or economic phenomena in Walla Walla. The project was based on one of the authors we read in our workshop, Rebecca Solnit, and her work *Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas*. The students examined Solnit's atlas, read excerpts from Lucy Lippard's *The Lure of the Local* (also assigned in our workshop), and listened to a podcast by Roman Mars, *99% Invisible: The Map Issue*. The students made the maps in multiples (each student made 12 maps and gave one to each of their classmates) and then everyone bound their own book of a dozen maps, creating an alternative "atlas" of Walla Walla. I was incredibly impressed by the research the students put into this project and how complex their maps became. It was by far one of the clearest project prompts I have created for the students and they responded enthusiastically to the supplemental material and the opportunity to examine their own community in a more critical way.

Jason Pribilsky

I co-organized and participated in this cross-disciplinary group for two key reasons. First, as I anticipate and poke around for a new research project (still on the horizon), my interests are drawn close to home – timber communities of southern Oregon – and issues of health and drug addiction in the wake of a declining lumber economy. The reading group exposed me to new works on the west, but perhaps more importantly aided in a critical rethinking about just what we mean by the "west," as well as recent attempts to brand a "new west." As the west itself experiences unprecedented environmental, demographic, and economic changes, so too must entrenched images of rurality, frontier, and cultural homogeneity that have long defined the region. So many of the works we pored over in the group agitated dusty thinking. Secondly, the reading group provided an excellent genre-bending experience, bringing together visual arts, photography, ethnography, literature and poetry, and experimental forms of history writing to aid our critical exploration of the west. Thinking through these forms, some foreign to me, some familiar, and having the opportunity to experience my colleagues unfold the genres and media they are most comfortable with, helps me see ways I can incorporate new genres

into my own teaching. While I enjoy the idea of teaching novels or photography in my classes, the pedagogy necessary for success in the classroom always seems elusive. This kind of exposure is extremely helpful.