

Conference Report on "Oceans and Deserts 2016 – Charting Transdisciplinary Currents in Environment and Culture"

Graduate Student Conference in Environmental Humanities, April 1-3, 2016, German Department at the University of Arizona, Tucson

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Conference Report on "Oceans and Deserts 2016 – Charting Transdisciplinary Currents in Environment and Culture"

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The conference "Oceans and Deserts – Charting Transdisciplinary Currents in Environment and Culture" was organized by the graduate students of the Department of German Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson and held in the "greenest building" on campus. Befitting the conference topic, this was the recently completed Environment & Natural Resources 2 building, which is seeking the highest standards of sustainability in both design and construction from LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. The focus of the conference was giving emerging scholars from various disciplines within the environmental humanities a platform to present and discuss their research, and to form new networks for collaboration and exchange among international graduate students. This year's presenters continued the success of the first two Oceans and Deserts conferences in 2014 and 2015 by bringing together different disciplines and topics, including environmental questions that originated from all over the world, representations of human and non-human species behavior, philosophical discourse, and literary and poetic approaches to the environment. The



conference was attended by 90 participants from four continents and opened with an introduction by JOELA JACOBS (University of Arizona, Tucson), the faculty sponsor of the event, together with the poet and current writer-in-residence at the Department of German Studies, HANS-MICHAEL SPEIER (University of Arizona, Tucson).

Panel I: Structures and Fluidity

The first panel featured presentations by ANDREW SEBER (University of Chicago) and INGE HINTERWALDNER (MIT, Cambridge, MA) on urban planning and architecture. The former addressed the causes and remedies of food deserts in cities like Chicago and the latter told a history of innovative projects seeking to create climate in architectural design. Seber's talk, entitled "Unlearning Sustainability: Mapping Alternative Geographies of Health in Chicago," focused on the contrast between the practice and the representation of health in built environments –



specifically developments which lead to “health deserts.” Such health deserts in urban areas, Seber argued, are byproducts of both profit-seeking politics and a prevalent understanding of the term “sustainability” as an indicator of (public) health. As a result of and remedy for health deserts, Seber presented exemplary projects of urban farming run by residents of Chicago’s South Side. Hinterwaldner’s talk about “Handling Circulation: Architectural and Meteorological Modes of Controlling Climate” analyzed the parallels and intersections of three architectural projects from the 1960s, 1970s, and 2010 which aimed to create sustainable and independent living environments, such as enclosed cities that use elements like wind and fire to create and control their own climates. Hinterwaldner discussed the challenges and the innovative potential posed by these three examples.

Panel II: Environmental Questions in China and Bangladesh

Environmental management, history, and the challenges of climate change were the topics of the second panel. XIN ZHOU (University of Science and Technology Beijing, Oklahoma State University) presented her paper on the “Effects of ENGOs in the Environmental Management of Contemporary China: A Case Study of Friend of Nature.” Zhou’s overview of types of environmental NGOs in China and examples of their work (with a particular focus on one of China’s earliest environmental organizations, Friend of Nature) painted a picture of quickly developing environmental awareness in China and the social, cultural, and political challenges Chinese ENGOs face in their quest to achieve effective change. IRIS AI WANG (Sam Houston State University, Huntsville) showcased the dynamic relationship between nature and culture from a historical perspective in her paper about “The Dagu Bar Channel: Engineering Culture and Nature in a Chinese Port City.” Wang showed how the natural environment of the Dagu Bar, a natural sand barrier protecting the port city Tianjin, was permanently changed by Western engineers around 1900, who disregarded Chinese water conservancy knowledge. While partly successful, the Dagu Bar also resisted these imperialist interventions by natural means, such as floods, thus partaking in its own way in the battle over the historically significant port of Tianjin and the (re)shaping of Chinese and European concepts of nature and culture. SALEH AHMED (University of Arizona, Tucson; Columbia University, New York City) explained in his talk the “Driving Factors of Media Reporting on Climate Change in Bangladesh: A Critical Analysis” how the media in Bangladesh shapes people’s perception of the climate change they are experiencing. His study of factors affecting reporting found interacting patterns of climatic factors, local politics, and global non-climatic phenomena that determine the trends of media coverage regarding climate change.

Panel III: A Walk in the Park

The talks in the third panel questioned the perception of nature in local and national parks and discussed the challenges of upholding the value of nature for its own sake. ERICA DAMMAN, (University of Iowa, Iowa City) presented “The Mesquakie Park Field Guide: An Artist’s Tactic for Contesting Produced Ignorance,” which detailed the creation of a 16-page booklet displaying original drawings and short essays about former Native American land that

Iowa City had used as an unlined waste dump site in the past. Her role as an artist allowed her to access the site's records and she conducted a walking tour of the landscape, which seems to be thriving despite its toxic past. Envisioning the unique challenges for the site's future, the field guide created a participatory platform for contesting the city's produced ignorance about the contaminated site. ALEXANDRA K. VICKNAIR, (Arizona State University, Tempe) showed in her presentation, "Creating A National Park: Yosemite's Early Tourism, Built Environment, and Rethinking National Park Ideals, 1850s-1860s," that 19th-century narratives and imagery of national parks portrayed them as "wilderness untouched by man." Yet while these ideas are shaping our vision of those sites to this day, the early built environment and tourist accounts of Yosemite's history paint quite a different picture. Vicknair suggested a rethinking of national park ideals, calling for a portrayal of national parks that better fits the 21st century experience of smartphone-wielding crowds at popular sites, rather than perpetuating the 19th-century myth of the lonely wanderer in pristine, untouched nature.

Panel IV: Mediating Representations of Species Behavior

The fourth panel addressed the representation of environmental questions in the media. MAGDA DZIABALA (Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz) showed in her talk about the "Colorado Potato Beetle and Sosnowsky's Giant Hogweed: Alien Species as (Bio)Political Factors in pre and post-1989 Poland" how two invasive species that cause severe burns on human skin were used to motivate political decisions and punitive actions in Cold War Poland. In exaggerated, often sensationalizing media coverage, the Colorado Potato Beetle, native of the USA, was cast as a biological weapon spread by the imperialist enemy in the Eastern Bloc, whereas the Giant Hogweed, originally from the Caucasus, was paradoxically introduced into Poland's environment on purpose and forced by the authorities as fodder crop, despite its phototoxic properties. SHRUTI DESAI's (Goldsmiths, University of London) talk on "Ecocriticism and Ecological Ethics: Exploring the Moral Basis of Digitally Mediated Tree Planting Campaigns" focused on the role of digital media in the representation and preservation of species. Desai examined how afforestation and reforestation campaigns that rely on these media advocate planting trees as a way of "doing good". She outlined some of the opportunities and challenges of employing ecocriticism to discuss these campaigns' efforts, such as mainstreaming a culture of ecological responsibility and the idea of saving the world through play, one tree at a time. Desai argues that the emerging campaigns prompt the need to construct a new moral compass for orienting contemporary ecological decision-making in the age of social media, and should offer resources for ecological understanding.

Keynote: Environmental Ethics: From Germany to Arizona

SEAN IRETON (University of Missouri, Columbia) gave an inspiring keynote address, entitled "Toward a Cross-Cultural Environmental Ethics: From Germany to Arizona," which brought together not only the humanities and environmental studies, but also the global, national, and local.



Focusing on attitudes toward nature and its transdisciplinary aspects, Ireton discussed Hans Jonas's landmark book *The Principle of Responsibility* from 1979 in connection with Aldo Leopold's classic essay "The Land Ethic" from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949). His talk probed the biocentric implications of each text and traced an ecocritical arc from German philosophy to North American ecology. In the process, the geographical focus of his talk shifted increasingly from Germany to the American Southwest, where Leopold worked as a forest ranger and began to develop his ecological ethic. By way of conclusion, Ireton narrowed the regional focus and showed how the ideas of Jonas and Leopold find pragmatic application in the life and work of environmental activist and self-labeled "eco-terrorist" Dave Foreman (a former resident of Tucson and now of Albuquerque). His project of "rewilding North America" – more specifically, of creating a wildlands network that reintegrates disappearing bioregions and extends all the way from northern Mexico to southern Canada – constitutes a grand-scale effort to put environmental-ethical theory into conservational-managerial practice. By bringing together these two distinct texts, Ireton's talk intersected with environmental ethics, biocentrism, eco-terrorism, bioregionalism, and the wilderness imaginary.

Panel V: Philosophical Discourse

The fifth panel turned to philosophical thought in the environmental humanities. In his talk on "The Metaphysics of Complexity," JOHN BAGBY (Boston College, Boston, MA) argued that metaphysics, although an unpopular approach in contemporary science, is making a comeback through complexity theory and systems sciences, thus addressing central questions of deep ecology regarding how one can define and make predictions about the elements of dynamic living systems. Drawing on Spinoza, Deleuze, and others, Bagby demonstrated the importance of individuation and the logic of involvement for understanding complex and dynamic living systems. In her talk "Nature as Discourse: Co-Evolutionary Systems Approach to Transdisciplinarity," SUSANNAH HAYS (University of California, Berkeley) showed how the universal method-based philosophy of Transdisciplinarity can help with the renewal of urban and rural landscapes in the face of climate change. Hays drew on research in human-brain and autonomic nervous system dynamics by Paul MacLean, Stephen Porges, and G.I. Gurdjieff that demonstrates the existence of primary organic structures, which humans must intentionally engage to evolve their potential consciousness. The development of curricula and education in Transdisciplinary art and environmental design, says Hays, would foster perception, pattern mapping, and aesthetic skills with the goal of raising humanity's normative level of participation in world maintenance.

Panel VI: Changing Nature(s) in Literature

The penultimate panel presented two modernist novels that showcase the impact of natural forces on their protagonists. In her talk "Sea Changes: Transportation and Transformation across Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*," Emma Brush (University of Chicago) problematized the nature of the relationship between human and non-human nature. Noting that Virginia Woolf's general fascination with the sea has long been recognized by scholars, Brush

challenged her listeners to approach the sea in Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as a non-human object that actively restricts and alternately propels its characters' movements, setting aside the ways in which the environment not only "means," but also acts. Brush's ecological approach resounded with Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and situated Woolf's characters in physical and perceptual relation to one another and to their mediating, oceanic environment. In his talk on "Döblin's Enviromorphism: Ideological Manifestations of Nature in The Three Leaps of Wang Lun," WILLIAM M. MAHAN (University of California, Davis) explained that the relationship between human and nature in Alfred Döblin's novel *The Three Leaps of Wang Lung* (1916) is problematized through a metaphorical transcendence of nature into the human subject, which has been theorized as ecomorphism by Ashton Nichols. However, Mahan argued that the primary metaphor-morphosis that occurs in the novel is of inanimate organic nature rather than animate, which makes this a case of enviromorphism. In this, inanimate nature comes to represent an ideology called Wu wei, with a positive ethical and moral valence that aims to bring peace. Yet throughout the novel, Döblin's image is one of a blending of ideologies, symbolized by carnal animate nature and the more passive majesty of the inanimate, which are in a symbiotic tension with one another.

Panel VII: Poetic Environments

The final panel thematized the relationship between the human and non-human through poetry. In her talk, entitled "Speaking Pictures on the Value of the Experience of Nature in Poetry," AGNES J. CSER (University of Arizona, Tucson) focused on the experience of nature in poetry. Following Neil Evernden's call for the "open endorsement of the value of the experience of landscape," Cser showed the possibility of letting non-human nature into the sphere of humankind through the venue of poetry, with the help of examples by Wyatt, Shakespeare, Goethe, and William Wordsworth. Turning to the notion of eco-poetics, Cser argued that, by writing poetry, authors like Miklós Radnóti (in *I cannot know*, 1944) and James Engelhardt (in *Boreal Valentine*, 2014) diverted from the traditional pastoral genre in pursuit of inspiring responsible actions in the world. In her talk about "Lassoing Time: Collecting and Combining Time in Elizabeth Bishop's Poem," BETH McDERMOTT (University of St. Francis, Joliet) argued that the descriptive technique, multiple vantage points, and attention to landscape in Elizabeth Bishop's ekphrastic Poem evoke a sense of time and scale beyond the human. McDermott read Poem as an illustration of what Annie Dillard calls "lassoing time" – an act of collecting and combining, but also making room for freedom and variation. As McDermott showed, with reference to Morton's object-oriented ontology, the expansion of the human sense of scale achieved through this reading can lead humans to see themselves within the context of ecological time.

Environmental Studies, Humanities, and Art in Tucson

Throughout the conference, the transdisciplinary theme of Oceans and Deserts sparked many productive discussions about culture and environment and inspired several additional events, such as an accompanying poetry exhibition. Poems out of Alison Hawthorne Deming's

collection *Death Valley: Painted Light* (2016), for which she collaborated with photographer Stephen Strom, were displayed along the walls of the conference venue. Deming is the author of five books of poetry and four books of nonfiction, including *Zoologies: On Animals and the Human Spirit*, published in 2014. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2015 and teaches creative writing at the University of Arizona, where she was recently appointed Agnese Nelms Haury Professor of Environment and Social Justice.

The exploration of the arts and the environment through poetry continued on Friday night with the invitation to a special Oceans and Deserts-themed iteration of an event regularly hosted by the University of Arizona German Club. Called *Fisch Out of Water*, this multilingual poetry reading celebrates the aesthetic uniqueness that one's native tongue brings to a foreign language. Conference participants and other attendees recited poems and short texts in a language that is not their native one, while enjoying German food in a local beer garden. The varied contributions all responded to the themes of nature, culture, and the environment, including political statements by the German green party, songs, and verses in Arabic, French, Greek, Spanish, German, Turkish, and Yiddish.



The conference concluded with a trip to the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (<http://www.desertmuseum.org/>), which is an outdoor venue that combines the elements of a botanical garden, a zoo, and an art museum. Executive Director CRAIG IVANYI (Desert Museum, Tucson) greeted the group with an introduction to the museum and its mission. Highlighting the museum's low environmental impact and its joint conservational and educational goals, he explained the intricate connection between the vegetation and wildlife of the Sonoran desert with that of the Gulf of California. Ocean and desert work hand in hand to sustain multiple ecosystems, and the Desert Museum therefore begins, unexpectedly, with an aquarium. After having their many questions answered, the participants explored the museum grounds at their leisure.