

Topical Lunch: Literature, Ecology, and Environmental Justice

November 16, 2016. Rice Hall 300

The session began with introductions, followed by a 15-minute presentation by George Hutchinson, with the hope of inviting interdisciplinary conversation about the role of aesthetics in sustainability broadly considered, and particularly in relationship to environmental justice. Hutchinson presented his research on the interactions in the early to mid-20th century between ecologists (particularly botanists), sociologists, philosophers, and fiction writers in Chicago. Ecologists borrowed terms from sociology, sociologists borrowed concepts from ecologists (notably “succession”), and fiction writing and urban sociology of the “Chicago School” had similarly dialectical relationship. In the 1940s came an efflorescence of interest in ecology as well as social equity, which were seen as intertwined in the work of people like Lewis Mumford and Richard Wright. Additionally, figures like Aldo Leopold stressed the importance of aesthetics to nourishing concern for “biotic communities,” at the same time that aesthetic production was re-conceived as a “natural” function of human animals. Leopold referred to it as a “cultural harvest”; Wright considered writing a tool of organic survival for a young black man forced to negotiate an environment hostile to his existence. John Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts (a marine biologist) approached their scientific collecting trip in the Sea of Cortez as a creative interaction with the environment they studied. Lewis Mumford pointed out the unsustainability of the gross inequalities between peoples in the immediate post-war world and argued for the importance of aesthetic engagement for human transformation.

The presentation was followed by a half hour or so of sometimes spirited discussion about the merits and demerits of “aesthetics” as a positive force for change or as working in cahoots with injustice (a question particularly raised by Atkinson fellow Neema Kudva). Interest was shown in the pragmatist concept of grounding ethics in a naturalistic conception of aesthetic experience as an inherent aspect of human life, and in the transportability (or not) of the concepts presented to understand ecological/social interrelationships in non-western societies. A poet in the room expressed enthusiasm for the way aesthetic expression was presented as thoroughly imbricated with the total “ecology” of a place or community, while others seemed interested, puzzled, perhaps provoked by this unfamiliar way of thinking about aesthetics and environmental sustainability. In any case, the discussion continued past the scheduled time period.

I learned a lot from the occasion because of the nature of the audience, most of whom work in disciplines far removed from mine. If I were to do this again with a similar audience, I would back off on some of the theoretical explanation of how aesthetics grounds ethics, how writing came to be regarded in an ecological way in the 1940s, and speak less at the outset. I would bring up the question of why scientific expertise fails to win assent in the general culture, such that we end up with popular political movements at odds with what is clearly necessary for global

sustainability. The difficulties of solving planetary ecological problems in a democratic and capitalist-oriented society inflected by nation-state competition pose an enormous challenge in our time. Reflection on this problem might evoke discussion of the issues addressed in a more effective and far-ranging manner. I am grateful for the experience and hope the participants gained something as well.

A revised and expanded version of the initiating presentation will be presented as the keynote address for an international conference on “Contemporary Literature as Cultural Production and Its Research Paradigms” at the University of Nanjing in December 2016. Parts of it are incorporated in a chapter on “Culture and Ecology” in my book manuscript on American literature and culture in the 1940s (under advance contract with Columbia University Press). Other parts will be included in a chapter I am writing for the in-progress *Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, edited by Glenda Carpio of Harvard.

Attendees:

Austin Bunn (PMA), Alina Carrillo (ESS, undergraduate major), Nina Chaopracha (undergraduate, International Development), Todd Cowan (ACSF and CEE), David Dieterich (ACSF), Carolyn Goelzer (PMA), Robert Hockett (Law School-ADM), Jenny Ifft (Applied Econ and Management, CALS), Graham Kerslick (ACSF), Joanie Mackowski (English), Kath March (Anthropology), Donald Rakow (Horticulture), Victor Seow (History), Paul Simonin (Ecology and Evolutionary Biology), Michael Smith (Ithaca College, English), Kate Suprin (API-ADM), Sun Chung (student, City and Regional Planning), Kristen Angierski (English, graduate student), Kieran Donaghy (ACSF), Neema Kudva (City and Regional Planning), Alex Travis (ACSF, Reproductive Biology).