

Distributive Agency and Interdisciplinary Art

Sabbatical Report, Spring 2018

Brad Monsma

The notion of material agency formed a theoretical compass point that oriented my sabbatical projects. What I'll describe stretches beyond the time of the sabbatical, but the continuity makes a better story.

For a number of years, I've been reading various theorists of what has been called the "material turn" in critical theory. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* is accessible, clear, and in my experience very teachable. Others include Karen Barad, Coole & Frost, and Bruno LaTour. Back when I was a graduate student, Donna Haraway's cyborg theorizing pointed me toward what would later become the "environmental humanities," so I was excited a couple of years ago when she and Anna Tsing (*Friction, The Mushroom at the End of the World*), walked into a panel I organized at [ASLE](#) with the artist and translator Amiko Matsuo. The panel, with two scholars from Japan joining Amiko and I, was about [satoyama](#), a mosaic, socio-ecological Japanese landscape that encourages thinking about material, distributive agency in a locatable, situated cultural context. At about same time, Matsuo and I translated [Art Place Japan: The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the Vision to Reconnect Art and Nature](#) (Princeton Architectural Press, 2015), and revisited the *satoyama* landscape of Niigata to attend the festival and present papers at the triennale symposium. Our papers were published in both English and Japanese in the journal [Culture and Dialogue](#) (Brill). I also developed my thinking about [ETAT](#) into an article for an issue on political ecology in the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* that came out just before the sabbatical.

Alongside this work, Matsuo and I have collaborated on a ceramic installation called Pyrometric, that deals with how humans relate to fire-prone landscapes and the shifting borders between nature and culture.



In this project, we introduce our art into assemblages that are themselves active and self-organizing, and we come to understand artistic agency as being more-than-human. This was the topic of a paper I delivered during at the ASLE conference in Detroit in June, 2017. The panel was on “Integrating Knowledge and Forging New Constellations of Practice in the Environmental Humanities,” and was organized by Kyndra Turner of CI English and Joni Adamson of Arizona State University. My paper described our work with Pyrometric and placed it in the context of other projects by artists we admire who work with non-human, material agents.

ASLE Detroit was also the site of “Pyrometric MI,” a ceramic tile/social practice project.



The tiles, fabricated by our student Christian Morris and glazed with ash from the Springs Fire, referenced a classic tile by Pewabic of Detroit, but in this case also referenced intersections of human agency with that of fire and the endangered Kirtland’s warbler, a bird I saw as a kid growing up in Michigan when it was at its low point in population, about 700 singing males. The bird depends upon fire to open the serotinous cones so that there are always jack pines 12-15 feet tall available for nesting in northeast Michigan. Taking the bird’s migration as a metaphor, Christian and I gifted about two dozen tiles to international participants to the conference. The gift box included stickers with QR codes linking to the Kirtland’s warbler research of two biologists we corresponded with—[Nathan Cooper](#), a Smithsonian expert on their migration between Michigan and the Bahamas, and [Dan Kashian](#), a Wayne State ecologist studying disturbance regimes in jack pine forests. The tiles gave conference goers something to connect them to the agentic assemblages of Michigan ecologies and it also allowed Christian and I to have conversations with scholars and writers from around the world. (Christian also presented his creative nonfiction about environmental justice as a rare undergraduate at the conference.)

Circling back, Donna Haraway again showed up to my ASLE panel, this time in a comment by fellow panelist Giovanna Di Chiro of Swarthmore College, who while critiquing the now-ubiquitous term “Anthropocene” mentioned an email exchange with Haraway in which they joked about the “White Manthropocene.” That pointed me toward the reading that ended my sabbatical, Haraway’s just out, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, that describes interspecies collaborations and

the kind of radical engagement in precarious times that sometimes sounds like the cultural practices of *satoyama*.

In September, Matsuo and I were also invited to participate in the Visions of the Wild Festival in Vallejo, CA., organized by the U.S. Forest Service and the Vallejo Arts Commission.



We installed artwork, organized a street raku firing, and gave a talk about our work, which now included drawings/paintings done by Amiko with Phos-Chek fire retardant, ash, and stripaway paint. It so happened that the Sonoma fires started during the exhibition, and I wore a dust mask for smoke while taking down the show in October.



Here, the continuity breaks down a bit with the last two related activities.

First, I took the TLI course in on-line teaching. This enabled me to learn new pedagogical tools and to think critically about the role of writing college curricula where one priority is to provide increased access to diverse learning styles and underprepared (or differently prepared) students. I watched many people in my faculty cohort (myself included) replace student writing with student video to increase access and provide more options for students to demonstrate learning. This raises profound questions that we don't seem to have fully grappled with.

Also, I worked to revise course materials for my multicultural literature course in response to recent readings, and I attending the Critical Mixed Race Studies conference at USC in 2017. When I teach the course next fall, I'll include selections from Jeff Chang's *We Gon Be Alright: Notes on Race and Resegregation*. I had read Chang's history of hip-hop and his previous book on multiculturalism and looked forward to *We Gon Be Alright* when it came out.

Much of what Chang writes could start a much-needed conversation at CI about marginal identities that don't fit into easy boxes: "On matters of race, America teaches everyone to think in binaries—zero or one, this or that. There is no in between. You know this, you refuse this, but you know how hard it is to complicate a conversation the Other prefers not to have. You no longer believe in meritocracy. You believe that merit is never neutral—what really is?—and that the rules are there mostly to preserve power" (146).