

Studying the Environment– Working Across Disciplines Kochel-am-See, Germany

Rachel
Carson
Center

- Date:** 19–21 July 2013, Kochel, Germany
- Sponsors:** Christof Mauch (RCC/LMU) and Helmuth Trischler (RCC/Deutsches Museum)
- Convener:** Robert Emmett (RCC) and Frank Zelko (RCC/Univ. of Vermont)
- Presenters:** Claudia Binder (LMU Munich), SueEllen Campbell (Colorado State Univ.), Poul Holm (RCC/Trinity College), Adrian Ivakhiv (Univ. of Vermont), Angela Kreutz (RCC), Thomas Lekan (RCC/Univ. South Carolina), John Meyer (RCC/Humboldt State Univ.), Gregg Mitman (Univ. of Wisconsin), Edward Murphy (Michigan State Univ.), Basarab Nicolescu (CNRS University Paris 6/CIRET), Rob Nixon (Univ. of Wisconsin), Andrea Ulrich (ETH Zürich), Helga Weisz* (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research)

This workshop aimed to clarify practices of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary research in environmental studies, particularly to illuminate the most productive ways that humanities researchers might engage in problem-focused environmental research with social and natural scientists as well as practitioners in environmental arts. Scholars from history, anthropology, literature, geography, political theory, philosophy, and the natural sciences met to discuss concepts of disciplinarity, with an eye toward generating recommendations for research program design for the Carson Center in the second phase of operations, 2015-beyond.

CLAUDIA BINDER described her work, coming from a multidisciplinary background and working in the transdisciplinary paradigm outlined by Roland Scholz and other members of the Swiss trans-disciplinary network (td-net), and clarified the necessity of an iterative process to address wicked, complex problems. Recent major calls for proposals from the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research encourage organizing researchers in large multidisciplinary teams. Binder pointed out that, in her work with community groups in Colombia, communities often value the *process*, whereas researchers value the *outcomes* of research. **ADRIAN IVAKHIV** emphasized the need to see these approaches as a starting point, rather than a goal. Ivakhiv highlighted that such work involves tasks of translation and need not put modes of multidisciplinary into a simple hierarchy. He also described how researchers engaged in these practices function across conferences, journals, academic and non-academic audiences by more or less taking on the successive roles or ways in which different disciplines work. Both also emphasized the historical institutional forces that have led to a research focus on real-life or real-world problems, a category that brings with its political imperative (solve real problems!) a danger of instrumentalizing knowledge production, with the exclusion and marginalization of work that is not obviously or immediately socially relevant.

ANGELA KREUTZ proposed a different genealogy for transdisciplinary work, one emerging from the field of psychology and the diminishing of subject-object relations in studies of perception, followed by an emergence of transactional models of perception that move beyond a subject-object interactivist models. In her research on child-environment congruence and work with Australian indigenous communities through architectural practice, a transactional mode makes more sense. **EDWARD MURPHY** picked up on his own work in urban studies and the unsettling of disciplines in *Anthrohistory*. He decribed how using collaborative oral histories in Chile for his current research on informal settlements can address established hierarchies and engage with knowledge-power dynamics. Murphy noted an irony, also, in the creation of many new transdisciplinary programs while the gatekeepers of professional advancement remain centered in traditional disciplines.

THOMAS LEKAN and **PETER COATES** developed the theme of institutional barriers associated with working outside of disciplinary structures, describing in greater detail US and UK contexts. Among these obstacles are conservative systems of institutional incentives, which punish scholars (particularly pre-tenure faculty) for working outside of their appointed discipline. Coates described a contemporary UK context in which a scholar's research can be periodically referred to other disciplinary reviewers, for whom its validity and coherence may fall into question, even as concepts of porosity and co-production of knowledge have currency in discussions of academic research in Britain. Environmental or ecological humanities is at the moment "pushing on an open door," but the question is how to more thoroughly and from the start involve arts and humanities? Lekan described the degree to which the North American academic system uses concrete benchmarks in its career promotion system that also devalues transdisciplinary or multidisciplinary research. What are the ways that the RCC might encourage social innovation in the university?

From internal and national institutional contexts of knowledge production in environmental research, **POUL HOLM** turned to international contexts of European research. How do we balance the refuge function of universities—to defend the exploration of ideas—while internalizing the lesson that the relevance of academic research is determined ultimately by its extra-academic context? The global challenge of transforming collective intelligence involves redefining knowledge, fully engaging the digital revolution, and empowering the humanities through *a social innovation in humanities*: how we organize ourselves, learn from users, and put ideas to use. **JOHN MEYER** contributed examples of cross- and inter-disciplinary projects as cautionary tales as well as models from within the cross-disciplinary commitments of political theory. One challenge is transcending divisions between more quantitative and universalizing disciplines (such as physics and economics) and interpretive disciplines that value knowledge creation through discussion and interpretation (political theory, cultural studies, history, and anthropology). Another involves the structuring of curriculum

in environmental studies in ways that do not focus only on the gaps between existing disciplines, but rather on a transdisciplinary project of knowledge. Rather than submitting to a singular grand method or agenda (whether it be a theory of transdisciplinarity or something else), we would do well to approach collaboration in terms of modest multidisciplinary and its virtues of pluralism, reflexivity, disciplinary humility, and dialogue.

SUEELLEN CAMPBELL described the hybrid form of her book, *The Face of the Earth*, which bridged creative nonfiction, natural sciences, and cultural analysis, while also confronting language barriers between researchers in the US and the UK. Campbell also detailed a multidisciplinary climate change project that she has been leading, which connected a humanities component to a national NSF grant. Campbell argued that we must put a premium on clear communication and develop metaphors for effective transdisciplinary work on pressing issues that require action now, such as climate change. **ANDREA ULRICH** described the problem-centric approach of the Swiss transdisciplinary network and her own work on the problem of phosphorus scarcity to ensure more sustainable phosphorus use, better policy, and access to phosphorus for the poor. Ulrich argued that, while it is important to decide on a particular transdisciplinary method for a given context, it is not clear whether any existing model works in non-democratic cultural contexts. Community participatory research becomes transdisciplinary through intensive resource investment: it takes time, it takes trust, and it may not necessarily lead to superior results than several monographs that could be completed by individual researchers given the same resources.

A final tandem on Saturday featured a dialogue with **GREGG MITMAN** and **ROB NIXON** (via Skype). Mitman described his experience as Director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies in Wisconsin leading a strategic planning process. This planning process brought humanities disciplines into the Institute through a Center for Culture, History, and Environment. A key insight from developing a multidisciplinary environmental studies program with doctoral students involved identifying how such programs prepare students better to pursue career paths outside of the academy, while traditional disciplinary PhDs (history and history of science, cultural and language studies, biology) remain the proven path to an academic career. Nixon described his commitment to public environmental writing informed by postcolonial studies and histories of power: we need language that moves between the realms of research and beyond the university. The dialogue turned to how an environmental justice framework (redefining the environment as where people live, work, and play) can be critical for transdisciplinary environmental research. A multidisciplinary environmental research agenda benefits from the robust involvement of science and technology studies and the biological sciences, both of which have an important role to play in challenging ossified structures of political power and conceptualizing new social forms. Due to the clear value of

cooperations between natural scientists, historians, and cultural critics in particular, it seems that “environmental humanities” may have already been superseded by environmental studies.

On Sunday 20 July, a final discussion focused on identifying feasible goals for problem-focused multidisciplinary research projects at the RCC for 2014 and beyond. Co-directors **CHRISTOF MAUCH** and **HELMUTH TRISCHLER** situated the conversation in the context of the RCC’s mission. Several participants suggested the idea of reserving a certain number of traditional, individualized Carson fellowships while adding a new category of experimental team fellowships. These might include shorter-term (month-long) working group fellowships, where three scholars would apply as a group to focus on a discrete problem in environmental research. Such working groups might be composed of several disciplines (including social and natural scientists) and indeed, researchers from several institutions. Those participants experienced with transdisciplinary research on the Swiss td-net model suggested that experimental working groups might also incorporate local researchers as partners, thus furthering the center’s mission of internationalizing German humanities research. The group discussed the possibilities of innovative forms of environmental research: how might short films, art installations, or other creative forms fit into the center’s second mission of raising the profile of humanities research in public discussion? How might the RCC best support this work while keeping to its goal of sponsoring world-class international environmental humanities research? Is it feasible to have an environmental arts initiative, film-makers or artists-in-residence, or fold these into experimental working-groups?

Such questions flowed directly into a closing call for participants to revise their pre-circulated papers into essays that reflect the rich discussion at the workshop. Co-conveners **FRANK ZELKO** and **ROBERT EMMETT** outlined the planned issue of *RCC Perspectives* on transdisciplinary environmental research, with a publication goal of early 2014.

-- Robert Emmett