

“Mother” Nature and New Environmental Religiosity
An Interactive Oral History of Women, Photography, and the American Landscape

Interactive documentaries, or i-docs, offer a framework for presentation and user engagement in digital humanities scholarship. This project, based upon oral histories with contemporary female American landscape photographers, uses the i-doc format to interrogate female innovations and contributions to the American landscape photography tradition. This tradition is often framed as a masculine and sacred domain, through publications by organizations such as the Sierra Club or work done in connection with government survey projects. The proposed project argues that women’s photographic work can be found in three general spheres grounded in a type of advocacy for the land: “wilderness” land as a place of spiritual worship, landscape as a place having value despite (or because of) the scars made on it by humans, and the “tamed” land as a restorative, but brutal, garden. Through the interaction of the photographer’s videotaped stories, photographic images, location mapping, and video examples of the land photographed, the project demonstrates the contribution of female photographers to the landscape photography canon, and offers a way to test the efficacy of emerging digital platforms to engage in empathy with and understanding of oral history-based narratives.

Background and Purpose of the Research

The purpose of the “Mother’ Nature” project is to determine if there is a commonality in female photographer’s approach to the land and to experiment with digital storytelling platforms. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Do contemporary American female landscape photographers position their work as advocating for environmental preservation or reform?
- How do their photographs enhance or challenge historical narratives of American wilderness exceptionalism (i.e. land as being a type of “Garden of Eden”)?
- Can emerging digital platforms such as interactive documentary, 360° video, or augmented reality provide greater user empathy within storytelling than traditional oral history narratives paired with photography?

These questions will be answered through the oral history narratives, archival research, textual analysis of the photographs, and analysis of video-based stories produced in multiple platforms.

While women have been involved with landscape photography roughly since its inception, according to Naomi Rosenbaum their work did not (at least until recently) receive due consideration. One of the few exhibitions came in 1987 at the Tweed Museum of Art, called *Reclaiming Paradise: American Women Photograph the Land*.¹ It featured the works of 27

¹ Gretchen Garner, *Reclaiming Paradise: American Women Photograph the Land* (University of Minnesota Duluth: Tweed Museum of Art, 1987).

photographers, including Laura Gilpin, Imogen Cunningham, and Dorothea Lange; there has been no similar follow-up exhibit in the 40 years since. Perhaps, as Rosenbaum notes, it is because “historically, this genre had been considered a male domain and . . . presupposed a definition of landscape photography limited to images that capture sublime grandeur.”² This sublime, as many have argued, transforms traditional landscape photography into a type of environmental religion. This notion of environmental religiosity is steeped in the mythical narrative of the “conquest” of the North American continent, a land Henry Nash Smith says was originally seen as “bathed in a golden mist of utopian fantasy”³ with a God-given Manifest destiny for white men (this was a historically male domain) to conquer from sea to shining sea. William Cronon notes just as the western frontier would be considered a bastion of rugged male individualism, the wilderness found within was also seen to have a restorative quality for those conquerors.⁴ According to Finis Dunaway, it was a sanctuary to escape the plagues of society and find renewal.⁵ Photographers recorded this sanctuary, including federal expeditions such as U.S. Geological Survey in the 19th century and the work of the Sierra Club and its associated male photographers, including Ansel Adams and Elliot Porter, in the 20th century. The Sierra Club photos, in particular, reinforce the “religion” found in nature, often published in books with accompanying text that projected, according to John Szarkowski, a “Calvinist insularity.”⁶

These photographs were used not only to celebrate the land as a religious sphere, but also to (successfully) argue for its preservation. The Sierra Club’s photos played a large role in movements to preserve wilderness lands such as King’s Canyon and Sequoia National Parks in California. The later highly-influential New Topographics movement similarly held conservation messages; in this case even land scarred by human hand had value and should be preserved. But while photographic archives in the United States hold oral history interviews with the major male players in landscape photography (including, but not limited to, Ansel Adams, Robert Adams, Minor White, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, Edward Weston, Cole Weston, Walker Evans, and Arthur Rothstein), the voices of women are largely silent. I have found just have just two archival oral history interviews with women (both deceased): Marion Post-Wolcott and Dorothea Lange. This project seeks to remedy this oversight. It is an oral history with 50+ highly regarded female landscape photographers, ranging in age from the mid-30s to 80s.

The project is firmly grounded in the traditions of oral history. “Tell me a story,” is the plea of the oral historian to the narrator. Those stories are powerful, at times becoming what Walter Benjamin called *mémoire involuntaire*, memories lodged in our brains despite our efforts

² Naomi Rosenblum, *A History of Women Photographers, 2nd Edition* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2000), 286.

³ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 11.

⁴ William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995).

⁵ Finis Dunaway, *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁶ John Szarkowski, *Ansel Adams at 100* (Boston/New York/London: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 34.

to the contrary.⁷ But as an oral historian, I am also stepping onto fragile ground. The oral history is a “shared authority” between the oral historian and the project’s narrators, with each, according to Ronald Grele, having (equally valid) theories about the events described.⁸ The interview is also in many ways a profoundly feminist practice: the personal narrative becomes a political act that can challenge dominant paradigms. Oral historians, as Donna Harraway notes, must come “to terms (that) the agency of the ‘objects’ studied is the only way to avoid gross error and false knowledge.”⁹

But the project also comes at a strangely political time for artists contributing to this photographic canon. When I first began developing this idea in 2013-2014, it was conceived of as a exploration of aesthetics, specifically in the odd sort of beauty to be found in human-scarred lands. While that is still a component of the project, given the election of 2016 and the subsequent moves by the federal government to remove funding from organizations like the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Park Service (including a move in April to eliminate all National Monuments designated since 1996), the interviews have taken on a newfound political currency. In 2017, even women working in relatively easy-to-digest “worshipful” images of the landscape are engaging in a type of political activism. Their narratives run counter to the history from above coming from the power players in American government. Just as the “Sierra Club Religion” of the 1950-70s galvanized a community to advocate for preservation and protection of America’s wilderness spaces, so too can these contemporary photographers, through images that demonstrate a tension between the sacred and profane, have the potential to act as advocates for the nation’s public (and private) lands. This project’s timing offers a unique insight into an artistic practice during a fraught moment in American history.

Previous Research on Project and Planned Arrangements for Interviews

I began research on this topic in 2013, specifically looking at the aesthetic beauty found in photographic representations of environmentally damaged land. I presenting at two conferences the following year, and had the research accepted for chapter in a refereed book currently in press. Earlier this year, I did a conference presentation on the aesthetic themes found in the work of three contemporary female landscape photographers, which will be published in the conference proceedings. This is where I first articulated my argument that women are taking photographs that come in three general spheres: land as worship, beauty found in human scarred lands, and beauty found within the “garden” (a sphere that articulates both religious, i.e. garden of Eden, and domestic archetypes).

I have completed preliminary telephone interviews with two photographers, Sarah

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt and Harry Zohn, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

⁸ Ron J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: Six Practitioners Discuss the Method, Theory, and Practice of Oral History and Oral Testimony* (Chicago, Precedent Publications, 1975).

⁹ Donna Harraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, No. 3 (1988), 592-593.

Christiansen and Nina Berman, women whose work, in part, focuses on the strange and hypnotic beauty found surrounding oil and gas extraction. I have also done archival research at the Oregon State Historical Society and have scheduled archival visits at the Ryerson Image Center, the Archives of American Art, the Oakland Museum Archives, the archives of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, and the Center for Contemporary Photography. This archival research should be completed by Fall of 2017.

The following 13 photographers have agreed to share their stories with this project. They are divided into three broad categories, based upon the type of work they are doing:

Environmental preservation via a recognition of the beauty of the land and unspoiled spaces, a la Sierra Club photographers like Ansel Adams: Deborah Bloomfield, Kathleen Norris Cook, Kate Cordson, Rachel Sussman, Linda Waidhofer.

Photographers investigating the impacts of human activities on the land, including addressing issues such as global warming, oil and gas extraction, and mining waste: Marion Belanger, Nina Berman, Sarah Christianson, Laura McPhee, Joan Myers, Camille Seaman.

The intersection of home and nature; i.e. the proverbial Garden of Eden: Tanya Marcuse, Terri Weifenbach.

I have identified an additional 40 photographers potentially to invite to be narrators in the project. The women tend to be clustered in three broad geographic locations: The Northeastern Seaboard (Washington, DC to New Hampshire), California, and the Rocky Mountain West (Colorado/New Mexico). The funding from the Charlton Oral History Research Grant will allow travel to these three locations.

The timing of past projects results in a void in scholarship and exhibition: the intellectual and artistic contributions of contemporary female photographers who are challenging notions of landscape photography remains largely un-contextualized. For example, Terri Weifenbach, whose work transforms the notion of the traditional garden, didn't get her first solo exhibition until four years after the Tweed exhibit. Native American photographer Camille Seaman concentrates on the impacts of global warming on polar regions; her first solo exhibition was in 2008. Rachel Sussman's vast body of work includes almost reverential studies of the oldest living things on earth (including a 13,000 year old oak in California and a colony of aspen in Utah estimated to be 80,000 years old), and was first exhibited in 2008. No project is currently gathering oral histories with landscape photographers currently practicing their craft, male or female. My project proposes to fill this void, focusing specifically on the female gaze.

Proposed Outcomes

During summer 2017, I am conducting archival research and will develop a travel schedule for my oral history interviews, which I intend to begin in late summer and continue

during my sabbatical in Fall 2017. In addition to the paper I will propose to present at the 2018 Oral History Association (Montreal) based upon preliminary trends revealed in the interviews, I also will propose a paper at the 2018 International Oral History Association Conference (Finland) on interactive storytelling practices, using this project as one of two case studies.

The oral history interviews supported by the Charlton Oral History Research Grant will also form the foundation of a multiplatform interactive documentary project on women in landscape photography. The project will be produced in phases beginning in late 2017, continuing through at least 2019. It uses innovative storytelling practices to help immerse users into both the practice of photography and the space of America's landscape. Interactive storytelling offers a unique way to engage the public in oral history narratives. As Judith Aston notes, the format allows for user engagement and participation of an almost-encyclopedic amount of data housed in a navigable virtual space, demonstrating a type of "embodied interaction."¹⁰ If the analog documentary is a linear story with a pre-ordained beginning, middle, and end, the interactive documentary, or i-doc, allows the user to "play" the story, navigating between ideas, people, and things in a non-linear matter. The order of the elements is less important than the stories that are being told. It also allows for full interviews and transcripts to be embedded within the larger story.

I envision this project as having two related components. The first would be an interactive website, where users can "virtually" visit locations and hear the stories of photographers via the comfort of their own homes. I plan to shoot using both traditional and 360° cameras and work in a platform suited to interactive storytelling (likely racontr); all gear and the content management system license are either owned by me or provided by my university. The second component would be via augmented reality using an app such as Google Earth, where videos and other artifacts are digitally "placed" in locations. Users would then "encounter" the stories at a specific location so long as they have the app downloaded to their smartphone.

In addition to the value of the interviews themselves, the project proposes a way to test the effectiveness of emerging digital platforms for oral history projects; I am working with a colleague at my institution to conduct focus groups as various multimedia elements of the project are completed. We want to see if users can develop more empathy for environmental issues and oral narratives depending upon the platform (i.e. does an embodied experience such as virtual reality encourage empathy more than augmented reality or web-based video stories with links to "bonus" content?). While it is important for oral historians to experiment with new technology and new ways to present stories within the public sphere, it is also important to know which storytelling practices are most effective. Because of this project's focus on location (oral narratives about land), it offers an organic way to produce a variety of story platforms using the same narrators and materials. I hope to be able to help oral historians to understand which story distribution practices may be best suited to their individual future projects.

¹⁰ ¹⁰ Aston, Judith. 2016. "Interactive Documentary: What Does it Mean and Why Does it Matter?" i-docs.org. Retrieved 23 October 2016 <http://i-docs.org/2016/03/27/interactive-documentary-what-does-it-mean-and-why-does-it-matter/>.