

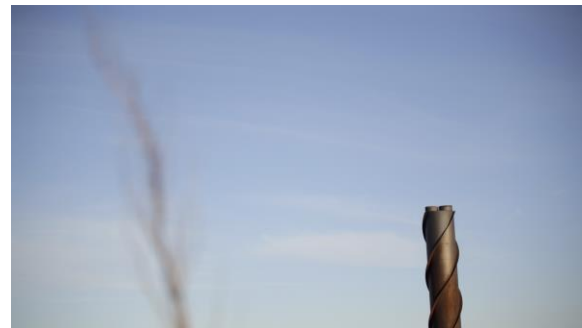


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Going Outside, Beyond the Frame

Sarah Kanouse, Associate Professor of Art and Design, Northeastern University

A few weeks ago, I sat in a very large meeting in the beautiful new galleries of The Luminary, an artist-run center in St. Louis, Missouri, discussing the themes that an equal parts brilliant, diligent, and generous curatorial team had distilled from a year’s work by seven groups encompassing more than sixty people exploring the Anthropocenic nature of the Mississippi River—in dimensions ecological, economic, racial, infrastructural, and colonial. It was a daunting task, and of course the assembled group of artists and scholars had much to say. I piped up that the framing of the Mississippi River as an artery through which the global economy flowed risked naturalizing capitalism and obscuring the fact that capital does not just “flow.” It is produced by the pumping action of labor—and not only labor as an analytic abstraction but also from actual people who work. The writer Brian Holmes added that the framing also elided the agency of biological and geological actors within the river as a living assemblage. In other words, both the human and the other-than-human had been obscured or subsumed in a conceptual framing that emphasized social and economic structure.



Figs. 1. 2. Example of rack focus taken from author’s work-in-progress video for the fall 2019 exhibition *Local Ecologies*, University of Massachusetts, Boston; courtesy the author

While only the second comment by Holmes addressed what is usually called “nature,” both critiques must be taken together to become fully ecological. As in a director’s use of rack (alternating) focus in a film, the first generation of ecocritics shifted attention from people to environment, but the operational binary—humans in a newly blurry foreground, nature now crisply rendered in the background—nonetheless remained intact. Over the years, intersectionality, actor-network theory, social constructivism, assemblage theory, new materialisms, and object-oriented ontology have pushed against this structural Western binary, often drawing on (and far too rarely crediting) non-Western epistemologies in the process. While scores of artists and scholars routinely work with ideas of “ecological

entanglement," it remains difficult both to sense and express the full complexity of the world that we—those of us disciplined in Euro-American ways of seeing and speaking—are just learning how to think about. The result is that instead of feeling through entanglements, we "look through different frames," an ocular-centric metaphor that betrays how Western thought pursues singularity for the sake of clarity. We focus on the river as a flow of capital, or the cumulative effort of laborers, or the wellness of fish and migrating birds, or the action of snowmelt and sediment. Like a camera pushing focus between foreground, middle ground, and background, our attention shifts between different dimensions in succession, but it remains extraordinarily difficult to perceive it as all of these—and so much more—at the same time (fig. 1).

The environments in which these discussions usually unfold contribute to the segmentation and streamlining of ecological thought. Lecture halls, journal pages, white cubes, and backlit screens inhibit the performance of connective praxis at the level of form. These are the spatial and material manifestations of Western epistemologies. They make careers and accrue cultural capital within an attention economy that seeks highly differentiated (or branded) responses as quickly as possible. Scholars focused on the Indigenous and people of color often experience outright hostility when they question the Eurocentric, capitalist worldview that undergirds these modalities. Practices that operate in other registers must flatten, accelerate, or distill themselves into terms legible to the legitimating structure in ways that can undermine what is ultimately most meaningful about the work.

Artists, scholars, and activists are experimenting with models of thinking and sharing work that bypass the compartmentalizing effects of professional spaces. The intensifying ecological crisis and linked social emergencies have made embodied, entangled, multisensory, transpersonal, durational thinking a matter of survival. It is one thing to talk abstractly about the agential resistance of the Mississippi floodplain to early settler forms of agriculture. It is quite another to do so while walking along the channelized and leveed tributaries of the river, as we did during the Anthropocene meeting, and experience the sensation of our feet sinking into dormant bunches of reed canary grass and our nostrils filling with the acrid odor of a nearby steel plant. Independently organized initiatives, such as [Signal Fire](#) or [Mapping Meaning](#); SSRC-funded initiatives, such as [Walking Lab](#); credit-bearing classes such as [Land Arts of the American West](#); and even the field trip initiatives of major professional society conferences all point toward a shared desire to go outside, beyond the disciplinary/disciplining frame that locks into focus one distance—foreground, middle ground, background—and not the others. Ecocriticism suggests the importance of sensing everywhere, all at once, without itself being able to do so. Cultural producers are experimenting with forms of holistic observation, skill sharing, and collective knowledge-making that might finally realize this potential. On a planet careening toward multiple climate tipping points, such connective, collaborative habits of thought are crucial to developing the forms of mutual aid and more-than-human solidarity that may make the future livable.