

Symposium: Critical Restoration Geographies

Toward Pedagogies of Critical Restoration

Robert M. Anderson and Cleo Woelfle-Erskine

Department of Geography / College of the Environment

University of Washington

Seattle, WA, USA

anderm@uw.edu, cleowe@uw.edu

Ecological restoration has been hailed as an essential tool for sustaining a healthy planet, a practice that can “help to end poverty, combat climate change and prevent a mass extinction” (UN 2021). These goals point to restoration’s intertwined *ecological* and *social* dimensions – not only to repair ecosystems, but to support human life and wellbeing. The growing body of “critical restoration” work, though, takes a less sanguine view of restoration’s social effects. Restoration efforts are distributed unevenly and inequitably, and may be deployed to greenwash capitalist extraction (Bliss and Fischer 2011; Kim 2017). Restoration also may reify tropes of a pristine, unadulterated “Nature” in opposition to universalized “Human” degradation, and re-entrench settler-colonial ideas of controlling natural processes (Smith 2013; Whyte 2017). These and other critiques belie the optimistic “win-win” framing of restoration as an agent of positive social change.

As restoration practitioners and teachers ourselves, we are thrilled to see a groundswell of interest in the field, yet worry that the field and industry is less critical than it could be. Many restoration projects aim to maximize “ecosystem services” for human use, assigning dollar values to “products” like clean air and water. Conceptualizing restoration efforts as the

application of objective, apolitical ecological knowledge for better management elides questions of who reaps ecocultural and economic benefits within extant political-economic structures. Despite longstanding recognition that ecosystems cannot literally be “restored” to historical conditions, restoration in the North American context still often emphasizes a return to “reference states” before European settlement, imposing dualist settler narratives of ruin and redemption. Selected “reference conditions” often ignore Native nations’ management, rather than supporting revitalization of cultural harvest, fire, and other cultivation practices. Too few restoration projects explicitly engage with or incorporate reparations for histories of racism and settler-colonialism into their goals and planning processes (Barra 2021).

In contrast, we aim to foster a new generation of practitioners thinking critically about the sociopolitical dimensions of restoration. We see the classroom and “the field” where restoration is *taught* as the essential site for the intervention of critical restoration. Alongside technical questions of how best to manage invasive species, create wildlife habitats, or measure carbon sequestration, teachers of restoration might ask critical *social*-scientific questions: By whom are decisions about which landscapes to restore made, and which communities’ values are centered in policy, planning, and funding? What kinds of uses count as degradation? How are environmental damages intertwined with histories of imperialism, globalization, and extractive development? How might restoration better support ongoing, global struggles for social justice and decolonization?

We have practiced the pedagogy of critical restoration through multiple interdisciplinary university courses. Our teaching draws on political ecology, science and technology studies, feminist, queer and trans theory, Indigenous studies, environmental history, the environmental humanities, and speculative fiction. Our courses emphasize student-led discussion, intellectual exploration, and speculative practices of Earth repair. The courses center on a project in which students critically analyze restoration at a student-selected site where restoration is needed or underway. Through research, field observation, and writing, this project challenges students to

broaden their sense of what “restoration” means, moving beyond the mechanics of reconfiguring ecological structures, functions and processes at their site to engage its social and environmental history and ask the above critical questions. We use speculative fiction writing as a practice for thinking beyond existing political-economic structures and constraints to imagine radical justice-seeking modes of restoration.

We recognize that these ongoing efforts remain the humble beginnings of a reconsideration of how restoration ecology could be taught and practiced. We are excited to work with other authors and readers of this Symposium exploring this terrain! In that spirit, we conclude with an invitation to fellow critical restorationists – working in academia and in practice – to join in developing and sharing pedagogical tools for more critical and socially-engaged methods of ecological restoration.

References

- Barra M P (2021) Good sediment: Race and restoration in coastal Louisiana. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111(1):266-282
- Bliss J C and Fischer A P (2011) Toward a political ecology of ecosystem restoration. In D Egan, E E Hjerpe and J Abrams (eds) *Human Dimensions of Ecological Restoration* (pp135-148). Washington, DC: Island Press
- Kim E G (2017) Bring on the yuppies and the guppies! Green gentrification, environmental justice, and the politics of place in Frogtown, LA. In W Curran and T Hamilton (eds) *Just Green Enough: Urban Development and Environmental Gentrification* (pp181-196). New York: Routledge
- Smith L (2013) Geographies of environmental restoration: A human geography critique of restored nature. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38(2):354-358

UN (2021) “United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, 2021-2030.”

<https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/> (last accessed 17 September 2021)

Whyte K P (2017) Our ancestors’ dystopia now: Indigenous conservation and the Anthropocene.

In U K Heise, J Christensen and M Niemann (eds) *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (pp206-215). New York: Routledge