



Symposium: Critical Restoration Geographies

Meandering through Critical Restoration Geographies: A Reading Group Collective

The CritRest Collective

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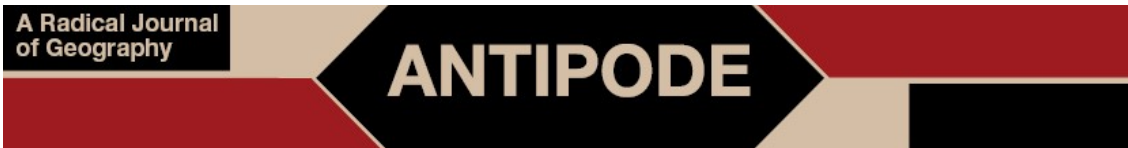
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A fluid, responsive process, restoration requires digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present. And the end results rarely, if ever, match the original state. (Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*)

Normative narratives of restoration tell of a return to a romanticized past, constructed wholeness, and moralized notions of health. These conceptions have ongoing material consequences that impinge upon divergent ways of living and being while buttressing settler logics (Black Elk 2016; Clare 2017). Settler colonialism and injustices (environmental and other) are enmeshed through what Kyle Whyte (2018: 137-138) calls “vicious sedimentation ... how environmental changes compound over time to reinforce and strengthen settler ignorance against Indigenous peoples”. In the face of this and as a critical response, we – a group of Geography graduate students differently and interrelatedly interested in ecology, futurity, health justice, and disability studies – organized the “Critical Restoration Geographies” public reading group. Holding space at the 11th Annual Dimensions of Political Ecology (DOPE) Conference in February 2021,[2]



“CritRest” was and is an invitation and challenge to move toward *process, practice, and partiality* as part of the work of restoration.

CritRest centers the voices and labor of scholars, activists, and artists engaged in envisioning and enacting abundant futures (Collard et al. 2015) within the intersecting movements for racial, disability, and environmental justice (Jampel 2018). We grouped the readings into three “Meanders”, with an understanding that these struggles, among those for decolonization and abolition, are inextricable. In this vein, our take on the socioecological process, potential, and limits of restoration aligns with Heynen and Ybarra’s (2021: 22) outlining of an abolition ecology which “seek[s] to enrich, expand, and extend the logics (and thus possibilities) of political ecology and environmental justice literatures with a capacious understanding of abolition geography” ([see Reimer, in this Symposium](#), on the ex/inclusion of disability).

The four of us initially convened as organizers in the Fall of 2019, forming a reading group as part of the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) conference for April 2020. We had been influenced by past organizers who challenged the passive/active (audience/presenter) dichotomy and instead fostered collaborative discussion.[3] The readings we originally gathered touch on various thematics within the constellation of “critical restoration” related to our research and political commitments, though they shifted (and are still changing!) through our conversations and experiments.

Ebbing and Flowing

When the 2020 AAG conference was cancelled due to the increasing reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, we put down the project while trying to adjust to the rapid changes in the world and in our own lives. CritRest reconvened months later; we met as a small group and as an organizing collective. We began sharing reflections and writings, working on interdependence, imagining just transitions and ecological futures while also planning the infrastructure for the reading group, making sure to keep our efforts generative and open to emergent currents (brown 2017).



Letting the project rest was vital to the shifts in ideas and perspectives we would later make when reenvisioning the group for DOPE. Building on the previous year's conversations,[4] the conference organizers selected the theme "Restore" for DOPE11. Our eventual collaboration with the conference, organized annually by graduate students at the University of Kentucky, emerged easily due to our shared affinities with DOPE's themes and goals.[5] In addition to switching to an all-virtual format, DOPE sought to disrupt the structure and expectations of an academic conference, and increase its accessibility, through sliding scale registration, online engagement, and a focus on reading and discussion groups. We had the opportunity to help reimagine conference session structures, and bring reciprocity (Kimmerer 2011) to the foreground of our collaboration in the form of access, care, and support.[6]

Being more than a year into the pandemic, we – the CritRest organizing collective – experienced and witnessed varied advantages and disadvantages of virtual conferences. While access to the conference did increase, access is never singular: video conferencing platforms pose barriers, such as for those impacted by burnout, health issues, limited internet, and the pervasive fatigue of the platforms themselves. Our engagement with digital conferencing was also implicated in the re-structuring of academic labor amidst COVID-19. Conferencing must be managed in real time along with grief and care work, which themselves are differentially and inequitably distributed. Navigating these tensions and reflecting on our past experiences of in-person conference exhaustion, we built a designated time of rest, perhaps best understood as "care infrastructure" ([see Wagner in this Symposium](#)), into our group space. Needless to say, we were encouraged by initial feedback and from the DOPE organizers' decision to reduce the overall number of sessions and foreground rest.



Our hope – and our excitement – for this convening was not only for an experimentation with conceptual frameworks about restoration, but also an intervention into traditional conference structures: through the reading group, we envisioned a space of public scholarship that could allow for intellectual, practical, and pedagogical openness with implications beyond academia. [7] Over the Fall and Winter of 2020/21, we structured, curated, and publicized the synchronous and asynchronous digital gatherings that made up CritRest, directly coordinating and learning with the DOPE organizers as they wove our project into their first all-digital conference. With 100+ registrants, we invited diverse forms of connection across a variety of platforms, time zones, and geographies, some of which are ongoing – whether reading independently, sharing introductions through an online forum, joining in conversations through social media, with email correspondence, audio and/or video conferencing, in chat windows, in visual format/posts during the DOPE break, with shared notes documents, one-on-one connections, through collective writing, and further readings.[8] Through a “Call to Practice Reciprocity”, we also encourage contributions to the scholars and activists whose work comprises the reading lists.[9]

Inspired by the environmental imaginary of a river system, we conceptualized CritRest as multiple flows of thought: the Headwaters, and the Meanders to which they are connected. The Meanders were envisioned to shift, bend, merge, dry-up, renew, and separate – both before and beyond the conference, flowing through discursive terrains, undergoing their own transformations and driven by the labor of whomever present. The initial groups included “Building Interdependence + resisting normativation”, “Transitions thru Ecological Restoration”,

and “Imagining + Planning for Liberatory Futures” ([see Reading Lists](#)). These lists were composed of not only multidisciplinary journal articles, but also podcasts, videos, creative works, activist pamphlets, and a (still active) collaborative playlist (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6QH3rypfZ2vCShwtMh0Gdk?si=265ffa0992bb4567>), all of which were available to those registered.[10] By including audio and visual material beyond peer reviewed articles, we again hoped to increase accessibility and involve a non-academic public. We welcomed folks to choose whichever Meander they found interesting or relevant to them, their work, their activism, and their art, and encouraged everyone to read the Headwaters texts. The Headwaters segment followed the Meander breakouts during the reading group session, separated by a 45-minute nap time (or meet-up in a virtual room intended as a play space). The Meanders flowed upstream into a whole group conversation about the grounding texts and critical restoration more generally.

Earth Making and Flowing Further[11]

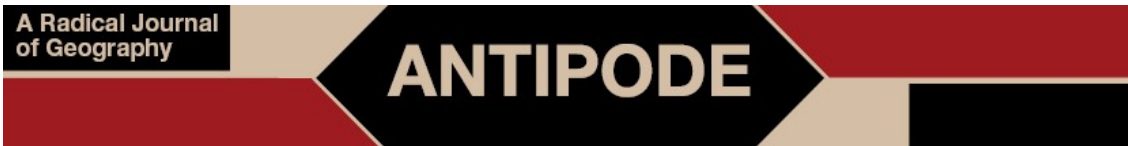
A couple months removed from DOPE11, we imagined our Critical Restoration Geographies Collective together at a delta – where sediments layer at the mouth of a river – amidst ongoing ebbs and flows of shared ideas. To foster simultaneously thinking back upon our work and envisioning potentials, we shared notes generated collectively during DOPE with all participants. Reflecting on our readings and discussions, we are now sitting with a framework for critical restoration geographies that is about relations as well as recognition, reconciliation, and reparations (Patel and Moore 2017). Because restoration cannot be reduced to any singular bodymind, patch of land, or temporality, our conversations had highlighted the interdependence of all beings, human and non-human (Clare 2017).

The embodiment and materialism of emotion adds much to our understandings of bodies in “socio-physical” spaces (Doshi 2017: 127). Examining restoration *critically*, we found, can destabilize the grounds and boundaries of environmental work and open up space for spiritual and cultural work in the process of restoration (Kimmerer 2011), which are bound up with grief,

care, and pleasure ([see Lefèvre in this Symposium](#)). This destabilization contends with multiple temporalities: the urgency of the moment, the longevity of overarching goals, and connections of the past and future in the present; inescapably, survival both precedes and is co-extensive with the restoration of relations. Indeed, through restoration *geographies*, we might “trace the past to the present and the present to the past” (McKittrick 2013: 7). Yet, there is a present, vital need to confront climate change, persistent health inequities, and the extractive relations that exceed planetary boundaries, all of which the unfolding crisis in Texas in February 2021 only served to concretize. Further, getting critical with restoration reminds us that apocalypses have already happened for many in many times and places (Gergan et al. 2020; Whyte 2017). Restoration, then, is not an end-point. Rather, there is no end to restoration, especially as environmental science and restoration are bound up in ableist, colonialist processes as well as in racial formation, which Monica Patrice Barra (2021) elucidates. In continuing to connect through multiple formats – this AntipodeOnline.org Intervention Symposium, a digital drive, a listserv, and virtual meetings to start – we desire to further examine, as Barra does, ways that restoration can participate in social and environmental repair in spite of this. We, concurring that ecological settings are “not a neutral or natural entity but a terrain of struggle” (Barra 2021: 278), also sense a way forward that relates the present goals of environmental science to those of racial and disability justice for communities living amidst “the ruin that has become our collective home” (Tsing 2015: 3; [see also Huckleberry in this Symposium](#)).

Acknowledgements

We are so grateful for all the support and engagement we received during the Critical Restoration Public Reading Group and in developing this Intervention Symposium. This would not have been possible without the support and invitation from the DOPE Organizing Collective, the efforts and aid from the conference’s volunteers, and, of course, everyone who engaged in any form with the collective. While individual names are on the pieces here, each contribution is



in part a result from the discussions we all shared as well as from the ideas and examples from the brilliant scholars and activists we draw on. We would also like to thank the *Antipode* editorial team and Andy Kent specifically for housing this intervention, and Priscilla McCutcheon for the advice and encouragement to submit. Thank you, as well, to all the contributors to this Symposium and to those who are excited to help keep working as a Critical Restoration Collective moving forward.

Notes

[1] While we recognize the convention of author order in academia intends to reflect the level of contribution, our organizing collective's contributions and labor were collectively shared. The author-order is intentionally random and was written while very tired.

[2] See <https://www.politicaecology.org/>

[3] Such as "Critical Geographies of Health Reading Seminar" and "Interdisciplinary Environmental Research: Reconciling Disparate Geographic and Temporal Scales of Data" at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the AAG (http://www.aag.org/galleries/conference-files/AAG_2019_DC_print_program.pdf), for example.

[4] These include the panel discussion with Dr. Justin Dunnivant as well as a "DOPE at 10" panel discussion at DOPE 2020 (https://www.politicaecology.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/DOPE2020_program.pdf).

[5] Additionally, this collective was brought together through institutional connections, overlaps, and professional transitions between the Geography departments of UK and UW-Madison, notably with two of the writers splitting their graduate careers crossing-over in opposite directions between the two institutions.



[6] We know that access is expensive; that access is work; that access is means and not an end in and of itself; that access is love (<https://www.disabilityintersectionalitysummit.com/%20access-is-love/>).

[7] See Rob Anderson and Cleo Woelfle-Erskin’s “Imaginative and Critical Restoration Ecologies” curriculum (<https://geography.washington.edu/news/2018/11/17/bringing-critical-lens-restoration-ecology>) as well as [their contribution to this Symposium](#).

[8] We continue thinking through how we can more successfully integrate asynchronous participation into the group and are hoping to involve more folks as organizers to help maintain and facilitate those spaces (if you’re interested, email us!).

[9] See <https://www.politicaecology.org/criticalrestoration/reciprocity>

[10] If interested, please contact us with any questions regarding access to reading group materials.

[11] On environmental restoration as “earth making”, see Barra (2021).

References

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