

CARE Program for Environmental Justice -- a Teacher's Residency

Introduction:

Caring for the environment means taking immediate action to cultivate stewardship at a bioregional scale. This program will cover the Lower Hudson River Valley and the tidal estuary that flows from the New York City harbor to Troy, NY, honoring the ocean tides that flow twice a day and that gave the river its indigenous name *Mahicanituck*—"the river that flows two ways." This watershed gives water to more than ten million people on a daily basis in the NYS side alone.

The CARE Program (Collaboratory in Active Regenerative Ecologies) is a bioregion-specific and radically innovative project that aims to invite public education teachers to a summer residency in the Hudson River Estuary that focuses on immersive pedagogies. The program's overall goal is to learn *with* the estuary and *from* ourselves as co-inhabitants in the bioregion. It aims to do so by introducing and integrating the Environmental Humanities in the public space of the Hudson River, while transforming the latter into an open-air classroom. Here, teachers and educators will convene, engage, and be empowered on a local and regional scale to take action on climate change from a humanities perspective, and bring it back to their students and their communities. In order to create awareness of the complexity of issues encompassed by Climate Change beyond the academic sphere and beyond the purely scientific, and thinking about a learning continuum from academia to the public and along the estuary's public spaces and spheres, this project aims to build a diversity of skills that are deemed important in the understanding of climate change and the empowerment needed to take action about it now.

The project's immersive nature is anchored in the bioregion of the Hudson River Valley with a focus on the estuary/fjord as site in which to examine our relationship with water, with an emphasis on building new meaningful relationships of interconnectedness with our watershed. The estuary is the connective tissue between the rural and the urban publics along the valley, both of whom make use of the watershed in order to sustain their livelihoods. The estuary is also the place in which to further develop the concept of

‘itineraries’ as a radically innovative pedagogy. In adopting this itinerant pedagogy in lieu of the traditional curriculum, the program addresses the gulf that exists between the climate emergency and the formal education system’s lack of a holistic response or call to action. Acknowledging the need to tie social and environmental justice, the program also connects the rural and urban publics along the valley, fostering communication and awareness of the close interconnections that exist between them and the bioregion at cultural, historic, geographic, socio-economic, and ecological levels.

Thus, this project is necessarily interdisciplinary in nature, bridging the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities (art, philosophy, history, culture and politics) in an effort to generate climate action outside of the academy and the school, and into people’s daily lives, as well as to empower them to drive these changes home into the social and public spheres of their communities. The interdisciplinary scope of the project also pivots on it drawing from education, art and land stewardship theories and practices in order to orient participants toward environmental justice action. Here lies part of its radical and innovative approach—aiming to transform the static and programmatic idea of ‘curriculum’ into the buoyant and fluid concept of ‘itineraries.’ Itineraries will be put into practice as participants float up and down the river in kayaks while imagining and creating their own sets of questions and the methodologies to answer them. The project’s scope is also innovative in that it responds to the urgency that both the academy and the public sphere face with regard to Climate Change whether cognizant or not of the urgent character of the situation. The program also responds to the lack of environmental justice tools that currently exist for teachers of all levels, not to mention an open-air classroom model.

Who is this project for? And why?

In addressing the absence or small number of teachers that represent the cultures of immigrants, for this project I want to focus mostly on those who identify as Latinx and/or Hispanic, both because that is my own heritage culture and because of the great numbers of people along the Hudson Valley—both rural and urban—who share this wealth.

I see an urgent need to direct this project towards those publics who are highly underrepresented yet at high risk of being assimilated while at the same time at higher risk of the impacts of climate change. For this reason it is that I would like to utilize the Public Humanities Fellowship to serve rural and urban teachers within the public education system that identify as Latinx or who mostly serve Latinx communities. I believe there is a dearth of programs aimed at this particular group, which could in turn become the catalyst for change within the Latinx communities in which they work. There is as well an absence of immersive/experiential learning opportunities and skills-building in teacher training programs that focus on environmental justice and climate action as parallel struggles with social justice ones. Responding to this need, the project aims to develop residency-based teacher training programs that work on the following concepts:

- climate change science and systems thinking;
- decolonization frameworks;
- traditional ecological knowledges (indigenous epistemologies from local groups and from immigrants' knowledge sets);
- notions of ecological and circular economy based on reciprocity;
- permaculture concepts and skills;
- subsistence and 'Leave No Trace' skills.

In particular, I see this program working best with Latinx communities from the Bronx area and communities in the Peekskill area, where I have identified some possibilities for recruitment:

> Peekskill Middle School and Peekskill High School, where there is a majority Hispanic student population, yet a minority of Hispanic teachers; and where specific needs in terms of staff and teacher training programs has been already identified.

> Bronxdale High School, with a majority Hispanic of student enrollment and a minority of teachers with that background legacy.

> High School of Language and Innovation, with a majority Hispanic of student enrollment within a very diverse student and teacher population.

I also plan to engage the efforts of organizations such as NYCoRE—a group of educators who are familiar with and open to alternative pedagogies—

(<http://www.nycore.org/nycore-info/>) through the guidance of Professor Dr. Ariana Mangual Figueroa from the Graduate Center's Urban Education Program where I am affiliated as a second year PhD student, and the Zinn Education Project's Teach Climate Justice (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/campaigns/teach-climate-justice>).

WHAT | HOW | WHERE | WHY

The project's main characteristic is its multi-day journey in the Hudson Estuary, kayaking North and South by utilizing the estuary's twice daily ocean tides that reach up to Troy, NY. This model will allow participants to camp along the side of the river and experience its habitats first hand. This format will also enable participants to experience, acknowledge, and hopefully become accountable for, our habits of consumption and waste, while becoming acquainted with subsistence skills and 'Leave No Trace' skills. This collaboratory will be composed of a core team of 3-5 facilitators carefully selected from different fields of practice, myself and my logistics partner (please see NOTE below) and a group of a maximum of 12 teacher-residents, totaling a maximum of 20 people per session. Kayaking and living by the river shores, we will become part of the ecosystem for 10 days, reflecting on our habits, observing the habitat, and drawing connections to our interconnectedness and interdependency with it.

The immersive period (7 days) will be preceded by 2 days of skills/paddling training on an outdoor setting between the Bronx and Peekskill TBD, and followed by 1 day of closure activities, totaling 10 days. Throughout the residency, participants will grow to perceive themselves as part of the ecosystem, participating in its cycles and flows, developing awareness of the direct impacts that our lifestyles have on the ecosystem, and becoming empowered to transform them. Participants will also develop their own ways to communicate these transformations and bring them to their social webs in the public sphere.

During the immersion period there will be discussions, activities, with an emphasis on self-reflection, touching five main topics:

- 1-introduction to the complexities of environmental justice and its ties with social justice

- a- home habits of consumption and waste

- b- social habits of consumption and waste
- 2-introduction to systems theory
- 3-introduction to reciprocity, interdependency and ecology
- 4-habits for de-carbonized transitions
- 5-the practice of habit-switching>>transformation to de-carbonized living

This immersive pedagogy is crucial for the conditions of possibility to experience a number of disciplines and modes of making meaning in embodied ways within a specific bioregion. The expansive and beneficial characteristics of these types of learning experiences are cited in a myriad of scholarly literature. Immersion is the platform to learn, invent and discover new habits of co-enacting with land and place.

What are Goals of this project?

- to engage the Public Humanities as an unfolding opportunity to address the urgent need to enact and implement de-carbonized lifestyles through renewed shared imaginations, starting at a bioregional scale. The Public Humanities are a bridge and collaborative approach to work with the Latinx communities in this bioregion, and learn, invent and relearn what habits/vocabularies/languages are most needed for this transformation.
- to discover, recover and protect the many Estuarian publics' knowledge pools.
- to conceptualize the estuary's bioregion as place for the integration of cultures, knowledges and ecologies, bridging the gap between a historically constructed division between rural and urban publics that needs to be problematized and re-imagined.
- to hold space for the generative dialogue between these cultures' knowledges and traditions, highlighting and preserving recent migrant stories and traditional ecological knowledges (TEKs).
- To hold space for the participants' self-reflexivity on processes of transformation, theories of change, and needs of subsistence of the many constituencies involved in climate change and environmental action.

- to develop land-based knowledges with the watershed in mind—delineating approaches to knowledge production *with* the bioregion, as ‘itineraries’ built of needs and interconnections internal to it, instead of top-down curricula imported from outside.
- to empower participants in their knowledge and skills sets of climate action as a holistic interconnected enterprise towards environmental justice.
- to expand the set of communicative skills and embrace others skills that empathize with more-than-human elements.

Since the project is a collaboratory between land (Hudson River Watershed bioregion, its cycles and flows), educator-residents and the public sphere, the goal is to develop during the residency period, and later re-generate within the public sphere, the following three elements:

1. interpretive plans specific to this watershed/bioregion:
 - to collaborate in developing what it means to become ‘estuarian;’
 - how to go from a SITE that has a diversity of inhabitants (humans, flora, fauna, specific biogeochemical cycles, habitats, specific flows of commerce, etc.) to a PLACE that is specific to the cultures, histories, geopolitics and resource flows, highlighting its interconnectedness;
 - to make meaning of the above from within an ecological interpretive heuristics.
2. itineraries of integration, researching what are the conditions of possibility for these to occur:
 - investigate and protect existing inhabitants of the bioregion, as well as existing TEKs and patterns of co-habitation.
 - collect ecologically-oriented stories from different immigrant backgrounds.
3. sets of transformative habits and embodied vocabularies:
 - begin to practice #1 and #2 by telling own stories. By re-contextualizing old stories into new ecosystems, new meanings will emerge.

For this to happen, it is crucial to have the Humanities as a public platform with which to engage people’s minds in new ecologically friendly ways.

My Background in Service of Environmental Justice:

Aside from my social practice as an artist (2009 to the present-please see CV) where I engage different communities in nature-culture connectedness workshops and walks, I have previously been granted a fellowship by SRI-JB for which I engaged communities around Jamaica Bay in 2017 to raise awareness of climate change in the area. As a Fellow I developed a plan to recognize the Jamaica Bay Watershed in collaboration with community-based organizations, members, and stakeholders to promote reciprocity and health in the area. In particular, I brought local stakeholders from the communities of Canarsie and East New York to the then Penn and Fountain Landfills (now Sherry Chisholm State Park but then closed to public access). Here I ran a community-centered workshop where questions about accessibility and process of conversion were brought to the fore, while also activating public imaginations about the future of the landfill (then undecided). During this fellowship I worked under the mentorship of Jessica Fain, Adam Parris and Prof. Dr. Michael Menser.

Also, in the fall of 2018 I was selected to collaborate with the Climate Action Lab, co-led by Prof. Dr. Ashley Dawson with the aid of the Center for the Humanities at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Here we met once a month to talk and conduct action-led research with a series of previously selected grassroots organizations, artists and activists from the five boroughs, looking into the pressing issues of food, energy and waste as they relate to Environmental Justice. Through my participation here I was drawn to issues of energy and eventually covered the grassroots Brooklyn-based organization UPROSE and NYC-Environmental Justice Alliance's efforts to decentralize solar farming in the area of Sunset Park.

Conclusion

Between educators and learners, teachers and students, and students and their communities and places of belonging, there lies the estuary as classroom to teach us ways in which we can engage non-anthropocentric imaginations, actions and practices for eco-centric living and social-environmental justice action.