Proposal: Interdisciplinary Humanities Center - Visual, Performing, and Media Arts Award
Alison Williams / January 17, 2023

WILDLIFE SALVAGE PERMIT

Against the fable of Progress, ghosts guide us through haunted lives and landscapes.
How can we repurpose the tools of modernity against the terrors of Progress
to make visible the other worlds it has ignored and damaged?
-Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet

"Wildlife Salvage Permit" focuses on the loss of animal life from vehicle impact - also known as *roadkill* - specifically on a stretch of road that I travel several times per week on my way to-and-from teaching, the 150 from Ojai to Carpenteria, and the 101 from Carp to Santa Barbara. As a microcosm of larger issues of multispecies entanglements and ecological loss and grief, this research-based creative project will culminate in an installation of ceramic bodies sourced from local clay deposits to represent the loss of life and offer visibility to that which had been rendered invisible.

California is the largest economy in the U.S., the largest sub-national economy in the world, and the world's fifth largest economy, behind Germany and ahead of India. It is diverse, in terms of population demographics, landscape and wildlife ecologies, and business and trade. Human-wildlife interaction is a key component of numerous governmental agencies and legislation in California. According to the Roadside Ecology Center at UC Davis, the total cost of collisions with large wildlife from 2016-2020 was $1 billion. In 2018 alone 314 people were injured and 5 people were killed in vehicle collisions with wildlife. From 2009 - 2017, the REC tracked 56,000 animal carcasses. Legislation oscillates wildly between the protection of animals and ecosystems, and the validation and practical realities of the death and disposal of so many

animal bodies from the interaction with the roads, including scavenging/salvaging for human consumption.

How can investigating animal deaths on this particular road serve as a portal/lens into the normalized practice of roads and cars (transportation, mobilization of resources, human access) and their predominance over pre-existing ecosystems that make up an anthropocentric "landscape" in support of perceived human needs?

How does the word "roadkill" serve as a rhetorical embodiment of the schism in the human consciousness of the actual events of animal death from vehicular impact - the killing of animals by human-operated machines (cyborgs)?

Questions are raised about which bodies are valued and which are not - imagining the corpses of dead humans, or even more "exotic" animals such as mountain lions, horses, wolves, or bears - raises a different sympathy than the bodies of small animals that litter (note the term) the roadside.

Project description / goal: This project will use the animal deaths on a particular stretch of California road as a microcosm of larger issues of multispecies entanglements and ecological loss and grief, culminating in an installation, ideally in a space on campus such as the Glass Box Gallery. While the installation is certainly a work in progress, I envision the following: A map of the highways is outlined on the floor with ceramic spheres (of locally-sourced clay sourced from the area) hanging throughout, representing the animal deaths that have been tracked. A visualization of a haunted landscape will emerge, where bodies that have been spirited away by various anonymous agencies and individuals, and thus made invisible to the car/driver (cyborg), are made re-visible in a created landscape of re-animated bodies/spirits/figures/souls. Using images, video, and sound taken on site in the field, maps of varied provenance, and ceramic manifestations using local materials and material salvaged (scavenged) from the animal bodies (bone ash, geographic inclusions), a new perceptual paradigm related to human-wildlife

interactions on the borders and boundaries that are roads may be revealed. Viewers will interact with these *vessels*, these *containers of former life*, navigating their physical and emotional relationship as they navigate their way amongst ghosts.

Contextual scholarship: The seed of this project was planted in a week-long seminar workshop with Joshua Trey Barnett and Jennifer Clary-Lemon called "Ecological Feeling/Feeling Ecological" through the Rhetoric Society of America. This interdisciplinary workshop - a rarity amongst rhetoricians - introduced me to the concept of *ecological grief*, which put a name to a feeling and a reality that I had already known, but not been aware of. Joshua's paper "Vigilant Mourning and the Future of Earthly Coexistence" offered up another term that identified a need I did not know I had - that of the practice of mourning, and not only mourning, but *vigilant mourning*, as a way of visualizing a future of which I had become deeply despairing.

Using Joshua's recent book *Mourning in the Anthropocene: Ecological Grief and Earthly Coexistence* as a guide, my practice will be rooted in and informed by three "intertwining" pathways of care that he identifies, "each of which leads us in its own way to see other beings and ways of being as worthy of our grief": Naming, or identifying the project and the problem; Archiving, or researching and assembling the data; and Making Visible, or creating a material reality (31). In this process I will be enacting the rhetorical practices of *care* and of *vigilant mourning*. In a rhetorical move of *care*, the term *roadkill* is deliberately omitted - or at least, minimized - throughout this project. Instead, words that describe the actual circumstances of the situations have been employed: *animal body, dead animal, carcass, dead body, corpse*; phrases such as *"animal struck by vehicle and killed."* In *writing out* the reality, I unpack the blitheness of the term and make the viewer less able to skim past the reality of the interaction -

live, animate bodies struck at high speeds by vehicles driven by humans. Humans killing animals because they need to go somewhere.

The visibility of loss in the small specific area on which I am focusing is a window to the larger loss constantly occurring, all the time, on every roadway. My investigation into multispecies entanglements goes specifically to the divide between the day-to-day life that people live and the attendance to their self-interests, and the overwhelm they feel about the impact of humans on the environment. The conflict of power to influence that impact leads to denial and despair. I am interested in that divide. My attention to this area, to the loss of not only large animals but small, draws attention and makes visible the losses and transformations that are slowly and subtly occurring - to imagine the lose-ability of the more-than-human life. In this way, I am enacting the practice of *vigilant mourning*.

Methods / Timelime: There are two parts to this research-based creative project. First, the Naming/Archiving, which will entail observation, tracking, research, and discovery over a 6-9 month period. Second, the Making Visible in the development of the installation, which will entail sourcing and processing the clay and making the ceramic spheres, as well as sorting through and assembling the other media that will be used (video, sound, etc.). This will take place concurrently with the Naming/Archiving, but most intensively during the final 3-4 months before the installation.

To track the animal deaths, I will be using the California Roadkill Observation System (CROS) app, the largest roadkill reporting system in the US, developed by the Road Ecology Center at University of California, Davis. CROS data have been used to plan wildlife crossings, plan for wildlife connectivity, plan safety projects to reduce collisions with wildlife, inform

ecological studies, and even by Caltrans attorneys to defend themselves against injury lawsuits (CROS website). I am in contact with the founder of the REC, Dr. Fraser Shilling, who is enthusiastic about my project and has offered support. In addition to tracking the animals I see using CROS, I am also engaging with other local organizations (Caltrans, Ventura County Animal Services , Ojai Raptor Center) to identify animal deaths I may not personally encounter. This research has already revealed the lack of coordination around the tracking, removal, and disposal of dead animal bodies from vehicular impact. I am also reviewing organizations such as the Department of Fish & Wildlife, and the spectrum of legislation on human-wildlife interaction.

I intend to connect with the UC Santa Barbara faculty community in the areas of ceramics, sculpture, geology, and wildlife-human interaction as I develop this concept. UCSB's National Center for Ecological Analysis & Synthesis may be able to support and broaden resources on conservation and culture. I was deeply sorry to learn of the passing of Dr. Ed Keller in Earth Science and Environmental Sciences, who was generous with me in his deep knowledge of the Ojai Valley in email exchanges in late 2021, and who directed me toward local clay deposits and other resources with maps, and articles on the Anthropocene. We had made plans to hike together to source clay, and I regret I will not be able to continue to learn about the land from him. Additionally, I will continue to develop my understanding and skill with clay and sculpture and deepen my understanding of local materials through engagement with my local ceramic community in Ojai, CA as well as instructors such as Mitch Iberg and Zoe Powell of Studio Alluvium. While I would like to take advantage of UCSB's ceramics studio, I simply live too far to make it feasible to regularly attend and join the community. However, I am interested in

connecting with faculty in the Arts Department and the ceramics studio to develop a network of relationships.

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