

Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Sand, Water, Salt: Managing the Elements in Literature of the American West, 1880 – 1925

Abstract:

My dissertation project focuses on Progressive Era American literature that explores the theme of land management set in the so-called wasteland spaces of the arid deserts, semi-arid high plains, and Pacific Ocean. The rhetoric of turn-of-the-century land managers, engineers, and developers insisted that humans and their environments remained separate, thus affording humans the ability to control land from a safe distance. However, the works I examine in my project demonstrate that even thoroughly regulated environments remain lively and beyond total control. My project archive, which includes Progressive Era fiction, memoirs, irrigation maps, aerial photographs, dry farming manifestos, and other texts, evinces moments when environmental elements act both in and upon the bodies of those intent on controlling them. In these literary and cultural artifacts, three elements in particular – sand, water, and salt – exhibit an unruly kind of agency, causing humans to struggle for control. It is important to shed a critical light on these moments of intense intimacy between humans and harsh ecologies since the language of management often reduces land and water to its mere value as economic resource. At present, very little literary scholarship exists that explores Progressive Era literature alongside the rise of scientific land management and civil engineering in the arid, semiarid, and oceanic west. Therefore, my project offers an innovative way of understanding human engagements with "managed lands" and will provide ecologically-oriented literary scholars and historians with a set of interdisciplinary tools with which to read environmental agency in the Anthropocene.