

## Leslie-William Robinson on New Analytical Methods

The five panelists presenting for the “Analytical Methods” session focused on markedly different geographical spaces and time periods. Their short presentations (and the break-out sessions inspired by these talks) suggested that although their work employed disparate methodologies, emerging from diverse scholarly backgrounds, commonalities could be found. The quest for new ways to frame and conceive of critical economic and environmental challenges, especially access to land and water, united and distinguished the spirit of the session.

Both Andrew Sartori (New York University) and Garrett Nelson (University of Wisconsin-Madison) highlighted the scholarly promise contained in rethinking common constructions in the environmental field: the terror of accumulation by dispossession, and the implied violence of territoriality.

Professor Andrew Sartori argued that a singular focus on “dispossession” left the important dynamics of “possession” underdone in scholarly work. He pointed to the example of the increased vulnerability to economic shock experienced by small farmers in the Bengal Delta, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as they employed greater levels of credit capital to expand and specialize their crops as a history of possession. He noted the failure of their accumulation strategies, with the credit shock of the Great Depression, resulted in an outcome similar to dispossession; but not all histories where people lose their land need be as violent or dramatic as dispossession. He reminded the group that capital is oftentimes strategic, and carefully considered when it takes on risk, or “possession,” and these are equally important histories. Capital does not always simply rush in, driven by the mad impulses of dispossession.

Garrett Nelson implored the group to reconsider the promise and possibilities contained within territorial divisions, rather than always focusing on the pejorative power dynamics of territoriality. He traced four case studies, three of which unfolded in the U.S.A during the twentieth century, in which establishing territorial relationships allowed for the construction of community, solidarity, and subsequently greater environmental stewardship. His upbeat message encouraged a break with the stories of violence, control, and power implied in border maintenance.

Professor David Bond (Bennington College) also utilized a key tenet of environmental studies to encourage new frameworks for the conception of environmental challenges. Bond explored environmental destruction (through the Canadian tar sands projects case study) to illuminate how we construct the myriad meanings of “the environment.” Bond explored the content of the promises made by energy corporations to reconstruct natural areas after their acknowledged and admitted destruction of tar sand area’s ecosystems. His presentation engaged with what constitutes the “traditional,” in the relationship between native populations

and the tar sands area, and therefore what it means to safeguard traditions as opposed to safeguarding life.

Sigma Colón (Yale University) similarly explored destruction as a creative force for meaning in society/nature relationships. Her presentation illuminated the many lives and deaths of the Los Angeles River, paying particular attention to community efforts to bring that river back to health. Important in this conversation is the creation of symbolism and meaning through the acts of “arts, politics, and magic.” The critical role of arts and literature in the creation of meaning and symbolism for our natural environment also emerged from Matthew Battles (Harvard University) exposé on the “invasive species” of tree known as the “Tree-of-Heaven” or *Ailanthus Altissima*.

The “Analytical Methods” session proved illuminating therefore for the usefulness contained in re-examining terms and meanings that are often ignored because of their familiarity in the field. Further, it suggested that collaborative efforts with embedded arts and literary communities could prove integral, and offer opportunities to create cultural significance and meaning, to better engage and attract wider attention to contemporary environmental challenges.