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Teaching and learning with Canadian art students in North Iceland: towards the Posthuman

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Teaching and learning with Canadian art students in North Iceland: towards the Posthuman

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Abstract

This article presents a reflective consideration of the author's design and implementation of the Iceland Field School for Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), describing her desire to bring her teaching, research and art-making practices in line with her posthuman values. Named "Imagining Iceland," this course provided 13 senior undergraduate and graduate students with the opportunity to spend the month of June 2016 in the small north Iceland community of Blönduós, making art according to their individual practices. The course aimed to support both the professionalization of the students' artistic practices and their engagement with the particularities of Iceland as an ethically complicated place to visit, learn and make art, touching on environmental and posthumanist themes. Offering a case study of the Iceland Field School, the text articulates the problems and contradictions the author finds in implementing her posthuman values in her teaching, and offers four examples of student work for consideration as to whether their artmaking and experiential learning begins to connect them to the world around, dismantling humanist hierarchies. The author ends with short list of questions that will guide her future work and that may be of value to others striving to implement arts-oriented teaching in the north.

Keywords: Field schools, Iceland, research-creation, artist residencies, arts-oriented teaching

Introduction

This article presents a reflective consideration of my design and implementation of the Iceland Field School for Concordia University (Montreal, Canada), linking to my ongoing desire to bring my teaching, research and art-making practices in line with my posthuman values. Conducted as “Imagining Iceland,” this course for senior undergraduate and graduate students in the Faculties of Fine Arts and Arts and Science provided the 13 participants with the opportunity to spend the month of June 2016 in the small north Iceland community of Blönduós, making art according to the orientations of their individual practices. As elaborated below, the course aimed to support both the professionalization of the students’ artistic practices and their engagement with the particularities of Iceland as an ethically complicated place to visit, learn and make art, touching on environmental and posthumanist themes. The purpose of this text is to articulate the multiple ways in which I aim to bring posthumanist values (described below) into the choices I made in designing and implementing this teaching initiative, as well as to indicate the complexity they bring to my creative work. The text identifies problems and contradictions in my professional practices, as I think about my research engagement with the Iceland Field School as a case study (Yin, 2014) and aim to deepen my thinking towards creative work and teaching to come – specifically, to the future Iceland Field School implementation slated for June 2020. After providing background to the Iceland Field School, characterizing the student participants and offering examples of their creative and reflective work in Blönduós, I end the text with a short list of questions that will guide my future work and that may be of value to others considering travel to the north to implement arts-oriented teaching.

The capacities of the written case study have been described by historian Carolyn Steedman in her landmark book *Landscape for a Good Woman*:

“The written case-study allows the writer to enter the present into the past, allows the dream, the wish or the fantasy of the past to shape current time, and treats them as evidence in their own right. In this way, the narrative form of case-study shows what went into its own writing, shows the bits and pieces from which it is made up, in the way that history refuses to do, and that fiction can’t.” (1986, pp.20-21)

I appreciate Steedman’s integrative, reflective approach, inclusive of ‘bits and pieces,’ while of course recognizing that her project as a British historian of women, class and childhood is different from mine as a Canadian artist-academic oriented to place, art-making and environmental justice. In this article, my version of ‘bits and pieces’ includes academic theory, my own reflections, artists’ works and writings, students’ blog posts (from <https://icelandfieldschool.ca>) and reflective and catalogue texts, journalistic coverage of the Canadian and Icelandic contexts and – essential to consideration of a studio course – documentation of artwork created by the students in Iceland. My data sets are centred in public documents used with simple permission; not having conceptualized the Iceland Field School as a research study through my institution’s research ethics board, I do not have summative student interviews to draw on, nor would I wish to conduct conventional interviews. As my practices shift, my

understanding of how I wish to structure my research and generate data does as well. In fact, the consideration of what counts for data is being contested by researchers who aim to be posthumanist or post-representational (see academic David Roussell's 2017 chapter, "Mapping the Data Event: A posthumanist approach to art|education|research in a regional university"), especially to those of us oriented to *research-creation*.

Research-creation is a Canadian term for artistic research, and is defined by our national academic research funder in this way:

"... an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms)" (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, SSHRC, 2018).

Many of us understand research-creation to be an act of "epistemological intervention into" or challenge to "the argumentative form(s) that have typified much of academic scholarship," as expressed by media theorists Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk (2012, p. 6). The knowledge outcomes of such a process can be explicit, linguistically based, and contribute to discussion, but the knowledge generated from practice is also likely to be, in the words of British theorist Michael Biggs, "implicit, tacit and ineffable" (2004, p. 13).

Of course, the question of research-creation grows more complicated when moved to a teaching context, in which the students are developing multiple aspects of their own practices as artist-researchers. A teacher may seek to include non-discursive ways of understanding the knowledge that is embodied in her students' works of research-creation, without falling into old ways of thinking that would consider the artwork as matter without agency subject only to the will of the maker (Roussell, 2017, pp. 5-6) and rather imagines the possibility of art to "instantiate modes of thinking *beyond the human*" (Jagodinski and Wallin, 2013, p. 100, emphasis in original). I am only beginning to imagine what those might be, drawing on posthumanist values and theory, and how I might discern those in my students' coursework.

Posthumanism and My Positionality

I understand posthumanism to be an evolving body of theory across multiple disciplines that challenges the notion of human exceptionalism and aims to re-balance thinking, feeling and practice towards a more inclusive and (I would argue) just orientation. My work as an artist, teacher and researcher is deeply inflected with environmental values that can be described as posthumanist. By this I mean that I am concerned about the future of life – very specifically, about the capacity of a luxurious biodiversity of non-human species to thrive – on our beautiful planet in this time of climate breakdown and the so-

called Sixth Extinction of this Anthropocene (Davis and Turpin, 2015); further, I believe that human activities and entitlements must be de-centered from personal and political decisions and the rights of the non-human world prioritized. I am aware that doing so invokes complex ethical and practical processes that must occur on individual and structural levels, and believe that such processes must also simultaneously engage with social justice priorities including equity and inclusion.

Personally, I am not optimistic and often feel what has been named 'ecological grief' (Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018) about the state of our world; at the same time, I recognize the trap of such grief, especially for someone of such privilege as I enjoy, being white, securely employed and financially stable, with access to healthy food and clean water, and resident of a context that is quite safe for people like me. Thus, I feel keenly the obligation to work for awareness raising and positive change through my art-making, teaching and community engagement. In this regard, I would align my stance with feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's notion of affirmative posthumanism, which she situates in an "affirmative bond that locates the subject in the flow of relations with multiple others" whether human or of other species (2009, pp. 49–50). I have experienced such a connected flow of relations with the non-human world at defining moments of my life from early childhood forward, and I amplify and contextualize this personal experience with academic, artistic and community engagement.

Currently, reflecting an imperative in Canadian society and for institutions of higher learning, I am engaging with Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. My readings of Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies suggest that such approaches are aligned with posthumanism in their emphasis on relational accountability to all concerned, human or non-human, past or future (for more on Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, see Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck and Yang, 2019). Such considerations are particularly relevant for people like me, of European settler stock living and working on unceded Indigenous land in the territories known as Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal (Concordia University, 2019), with Tiohtiá:ke being the Mohawk name that preceded the use of 'Montreal' for this area. Within the university, we write and speak a Territorial Acknowledgement as a reflection of the ongoing injustices of colonization to our First Nations peoples and Inuit, as part of the work of Indigenizing the academy and decolonization our practices. I also see these acknowledgements as a step towards a future, broader acknowledgement: one that also recognizes the obligations, respect and redress that we owe all creatures and aspects of our planet's natural life.

A longstanding focus of my work is the urban nature of Montreal (population 4 million) and Toronto (population 6 million), the two southern Canadian cities where I've lived, created and taught art through the past three decades, where we struggle with issues including habitat and species loss and the environmental degradations of industrialization, meaning, ultimately, with the predations of capitalism and colonialism. My most recent creative project is *Walk in the Water | Marcher sur les eaux* (2018), a 'talking' textile map that uses oral history and visual art to explore attitudes towards our St. Lawrence River and histories of two centuries of human infilling of the contaminated shoreline of Pointe-St-Charles neighbourhood of Montreal. The map is touch-sensitive in spots, with five stitched switches each

activating the playback of a short (1 to 2 minute) excerpt of an audio interview with a scientist, sport fisher, environmentalist, community activist and the hydrophonically-recorded below-surface voice of the water itself. Since my visit to Iceland in 2016, I developed *Iceland: Earth and Sky* (2018), which uses the walking and mapping as method and form to question modes of representation such as the Mercator projection, the 24-hour clock, the grid; as well as to consider notions of place and belonging. Integrating textiles and volcanic rocks found on Icelandic beaches, the map took two years of digital and hand stitching, much of it in Icelandic wools of colours that reflected what I saw around me in north Iceland, during June's peak growing season (see Vaughan, 2017a, 2017b).

As much as I love and stand by my artwork, I acknowledge the contradictory environmental ethics of creating discretionary objects within a world overwhelmed by stuff, and of using materials with a noticeable environmental footprint (oil and acrylic paints, commercially produced and dyed textiles, photography, electronics, digital technology). I speak about this uncomfortable problem in artist talks and teaching, thinking with educator-theorist Natalie Loveless's distinction between 'art on ecology' (i.e. with ecology as its subject matter) and 'art that is formed ecologically' (by the artist's choice of low impact materials) (2018). Currently my work moves between those two approaches. I struggle to reconcile my posthuman values with my material practice, in other words, to work more sustainably by reorienting my art school training, habits of imagination and histories of creative practice to the creation of work that is formed ecologically. At the same time, I recognize that through its use of familiar artistic or everyday materials, an artwork invokes materials-specific cultural discourses, traditions of representation and sensory pleasures for viewers/listeners/learners. Thus, the artist/audience can work with/against embedded understanding of materials, which can potentially enhance the work's public pedagogy, or what a work informally offers as 'learning' in public spaces. I acknowledge that I respond to theory as an artist, meaning that I connect with it in 'bits and pieces,' drawing on ideas that I internalize and to some extent embody in my work rather than formulating extended text-based arguments.

Like other projects of mine, *Iceland: Earth and Sky* and *Walk in the Water* draw on the potential of aesthetics to engage ethics, as political theorist Jane Bennett postulates (2001) – that is, for the love of the beautiful to motivate us to do what is just. While the provocative power of art is much debated, many would agree with feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz (2008) that art can help make visible both the wonderful and the terrible; and that such visibility creates an opportunity for us to relate and make change. If we can do so ethically – meaning in a manner that recognizes the rights and agencies of human and non-human players – then we may enact an ethical relation that "create[s] possible worlds by mobilizing resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination," as Braidotti encouraged (2018, p. 267). When environmental writer Dan Egan was asked what single act could best ensure the future of the Great Lakes, he responded that one should raise a child to love the Lakes (2017): I hope to generate a parallel love for the complex continuum of non-human and human worlds – the dynamic, evolving relation that cultural theorist Donna Haraway calls *naturecultures* (2016) – within the viewers of my artwork and participants in my courses and workshops. Writing specifically about the experience of Iceland – a focus of this text – Icelandic scholars Johannisdóttir and

Thorsgeirsdóttir assert (and I agree) that, “Ecophilosophical and posthumanist art can make us become aware of our connectedness as well as of our moral challenge as a species” (2015, p. 116). It is from an evolving standpoint that acknowledges these theoretical and academic statements as well as artistic embodiments and my own lived experience that I developed and set the curriculum for the Iceland Field School. I hoped my students would connect to and perhaps grow to love Iceland as much as I do, and from that connected relationship be more deeply invested in the ethical considerations of posthumanism and reflection on their own positionalities. I asked them to be reflective and deliberate in imagining their own versions of Iceland, recognizing that we always see through our own lenses.

Background to the Iceland Field School

The Iceland Field School developed from my own experience as an artist at the Icelandic Textile Center for the month of June, 2016. The Icelandic Textile Center has been offering residencies to artists working in textiles and related practices since 2005. About eight successful applicants per month are granted accommodation and space for work in embroidery, stitching, spinning, knitting, weaving, installation, drawing, painting, video and performance. This is a paid residency, meaning that the artist pays an accommodation/access fee. Mostly non-Icelanders, artists-in-residence are inspired by many aspects of the locale, as the 2018 annual catalogue attests (Icelandic Textile Center, 2019). They also appreciate access to the historic and contemporary exhibitions of Icelandic wool and handwork at the Textile Museum, an independent institution conveniently located next door to the residency (<http://textile.is/english-2/>). While artists work according to their own devising, the four-person staff at the Icelandic Textile Center can also offer, respectively, expertise in Icelandic sheep, wool, spinning and knitting; community practice and social inclusion via textiles; weaving as an historic and creative practice; and methodologies of regional and rural research. The Icelandic Textile Center has previously collaborated with the Iceland University of the Arts on short-term learning activities for students in fashion, but before we co-developed the Iceland Field School had not worked with a post-secondary institution to offer an extended (monthlong) educational experience. I had four linked reasons for proposing they do so.

The first reason for choosing Blönduós and the Icelandic Textile Center as a Field School site is because of the success of the artists’ residency. The context is already functioning effectively for artistic work and ease of living, thanks to knowledgeable and helpful hosts; the grocery store, library, sports facilities; access to art materials and hardware; access to travel within Iceland by bus or car rental; walking routes, farms and the presence of wildlife (the Blanda River is a known bird nesting site). Offering a Field School as an adaptation of an existing and successful artist’s residency made sense in terms of generating experiential learning for students. After all, “Field school programs are designed to provide students with experience and skills relevant to their chosen disciplines, research topics, or professional practices; they are opportunities to apply academic concepts to a ‘real-world’ setting” (Karakos et al., 2016, p. 168). In professional artistic practice, residencies are ‘real world’ – acceptance at a reputable residency is a sign of professional achievement – if not necessarily common or affordable. As the name suggests, residencies tend to exist apart from the artist’s daily life: some are oriented to

social engagement, some to retreat. Cultural theorists Michael Lithgow and Karen Wall write that residencies “exist in hundreds if not thousands of different configurations all over the world, in over 100 countries in every kind of arts discipline and are hosted and organized by many different kinds of organizations” and “create affordances for experiment, learning and creation on the part of individual artists, social exchange and engagement, and/or cooperation among and between professions and disciplines” (2018, para 2).

I believed the residency experience could be particularly meaningful to Concordia University students, offering focus and freedom. These attributes are hard-won if not impossible during the academic year, where many Concordia students concurrently take three-to-five classes per term, some with internships; work part-time or full-time to support themselves; and can additionally be responsible for child or elder care. In such a context, the students’ understanding of themselves as artists, researchers and learners is likely to be partial and fragmented, in ways that the residency might allow them to mitigate, at least temporarily.

The second reason was the endless daylight of the polar north’s summer – and the Icelandic Textile Center’s willingness to reserve their space for us in the coveted solstice month of June. Given its latitude just south of the Arctic Circle, Blönduós in June offered sufficient natural light to be securely walked by the able-bodied at almost any time of the day or night. (Of course, the very low crime rate in Iceland boosted urban Canadians’ comfort in venturing out.) Plus, based on my own experience, I expected the long days of the polar north to add to participants’ understanding of a changeable experience of time (hopefully, from limited to capacious) and to shift the way they attended to place. (Place of course is a complex concept whose full unpacking is beyond the scope of this article; here, I draw on the work of feminist geographer Doreen Massey, who considered place (which she called space) as a dynamic interconnection of stories from multiple perspectives/eras/creatures. See Massey, 2005) When the daylight endures almost without end, working and living can expand into unusual parts of the schedule, sometimes bringing a corresponding shift in our understanding of ourselves. Among the many forms such a shift could take is that of a deeper connection with the non-human world around. As noted earlier, I see such connection as potential prelude to a deepening posthuman awareness and ethics.

Relatedly, the third reason for siting the Field School in Iceland is the beauty and precarity of Iceland’s landscapes, which are diverse, volcanic (very different from most Canadian terrain), and exceptionally sensitive to human impact. Iceland’s environment is enticing to international visitors, who tend to be self-described “nature tourists,” interested in “gazing at, playing in and enjoying nature” (Sæþórsdóttir, 2010, p. 29). In the relatively pristine small town/rural setting of Blönduós, away from the distractions and demands of our own busy urban lives, we would be prompted, I hoped, to consider how and whether environmental issues impacted our artistic work and our lives. We would be encouraged to do so by environmentally themed curricular materials – such as Þorfinnur Guðnason and Andri Snaer Magnússon’s film *Dreamland* (2009) about the vulnerability of precarious Icelandic ecosystems to extractivist foreign mining and energy interests.

The fourth reason for the Iceland location links to the third, and is the exceptional allure that the country now has for tourists. After the global 2008 economic crash, which hit Iceland very hard, the country took up an official policy of tourism development to generate necessary revenue. The small country of 330,000 has been very successful in this regard: in 2018, Iceland received more than 2.3 million visitors (Fontaine, 2019), seven visitors for every local, with tourism contributing more than 10% to Iceland's gross domestic product and becoming its largest economic sector (Presser, 2019). Traveling to Iceland among this tourist surge raises real questions of ethics and sustainability, questions that have recently begun to be asked of artists' residencies generally: what is the appropriateness of the long-distance travel, often to remote or fragile sites, upon which the residency model is based?

While many residencies may incorporate concerns about environmental sustainability into their mandates and programs, there are other questions worth asking: where do artists come from to attend residencies, and how do they get there? Residencies like Fogo Island [in Newfoundland, Canada] are situated in remote, environmentally sensitive areas and encourage artists to consider this fact in their work; residencies can also be found in many other isolated places around the world, like the half-dozen or so in rural Iceland. But rather than bringing in groups of artists to reflect on the landscape, wouldn't the responsible choice be to limit access to as few people as possible? (Kenins, 2013, para 7)

Indeed: who has the right to access these places? Under what conditions and with what expectations? I was and remain conflicted: we should refrain from going to reduce numbers alone; we should go and in some way take up the issues. In 2018, I chose to persist, which can be seen as to be in conflict with the posthuman values I say I espouse. I chose the positive value of going to the students, myself, and (I hope) to the Icelanders of our association over the positive value to the nonhuman world of our refraining from going. (I take this issue up again at the end of this text.)

The curriculum I developed was particular to our context and positionality. It was designed first and foremost as a 'residency' to favour independent creative work, and yet also included curricular requirements and options that explored ideas and raised questions about the ethical, environmental and artistic complexities of visiting Iceland at a time of extreme tourism. Students attended workshops in knitting techniques and tapestry weaving, and Icelandic natural dye processes. We toured the nearby Blanda Power Station, which provides electricity to one-third of the country and while award-winning for community engagement and sustainability (Landsvirkjun, 2013), it also required river damming and caused flooding of habitat. We visited a sheep farm and held young lambs, a first for most of our urban group. We learned about the textile projects of archaeologically-oriented artist-researchers at the Iceland Knit Fest.

Students were asked to think about their public persona as artists/visitors to Iceland through social media requirements: as a group on a pre-arranged day we took over the Faculty of Fine Arts Instagram

feed with our images; and each student was asked to write two blogposts for the Iceland Field School website during their time in residence, on topics of their own choosing. My goal was to have them move beyond traditional academic writing to respond to aspects of their own experience, which some did descriptively, others analytically and evaluatively. Thoughts on nature, tourism, textiles and the ever-present daylight dominate their posts. Most importantly, students were to engage with their own creative practice whether via creating specific outcome(s) or through experimentation. Their work would be – they knew going in – showcased in exhibitions in both Blönduós and Montreal. All along, their work, our work, was guided by two orienting questions:

- What does it mean to travel to the exceptionally popular destination of Iceland to learn and create artwork at this particular cultural and environmental moment?
- How do I as a visitor/artist/academic engage ethically and aesthetically with the people, creatures and environments of this place? What can I offer? What do I hope to receive?

I deliberately made no stipulation for how they should take up these questions, which I thought of as sparks to connection rather than requirements for linguistic articulation. Thus, as I worked with the students individually and in groups, I looked for evidence of connection, of the emergence of a kind of relational accountability either in their words about their work or the work itself. This will be seen in the next section of the text, which introduces the students as a group and discusses projects by four participants.

Posthumanism and the students' positionalities (in brief)

While it is impossible to do justice to the 13 participants by sketching out demographic indicators, perhaps some summary will help give a sense of the group. Students attending the Iceland Field School were all enrolled in Concordia University degree-granting programs, from bachelor's (7) through master's (5) and doctoral (1) studies. Concordia is one of 11 universities in the Greater Montreal region, which has the highest number of university students per capita of all metropolitan areas in North America, and 170,000 university students total (Palais de congrès de Montréal, 2019). Concordia itself is a mid-sized (enrollment, 45,000), largely publicly-funded Canadian university that grew out of adult education initiatives of the early 1900s, since then continuing to position itself for access, inclusion and innovation rather than elitism. The Iceland Field School's cohort of 13 can be described in many ways, including but of course not limited to the following: 10 who identify as female, two who identify as male, one who identifies as gender fluid; eight Canadian-born students from at least three provinces, five international students or immigrants from countries including Brazil, Indonesia, Switzerland, Syria and the United States (information that emerged anecdotally, beyond which national and ethnocultural affiliation were not investigated); six whose first language is not English, seven whose mother tongue is English (all spoke English, which was our lingua franca with most Icelanders, as well); four who identified as textile artists, eight who considered themselves artists in other media, one who called herself a 'kitchen artist' (all explored some aspect of textile practice while in residence); three who had children they discussed, who were being cared for by their partners at home in Canada (other than that

marital/family status was not investigated); all were adults, with ages ranging from early 20s to middle-age (and not further investigated); all were able bodied and generally healthy, although two left early for medical reasons; all received a Quebec mobility bursary (CAD\$1000) as a credit towards the tuition (individual by program and residency status) and field school program fee (CAD\$2300 which included accommodation and workshops; travel costs were individually arranged and paid). The students lived two to a room at the Icelandic Textile Center, where they shared two kitchens, three bathrooms and several studio spaces. In these contexts, the students worked at “Imagining Iceland,” often through the environmentally themed lens that I proposed.

Emblematic of our collective experience – indeed we used the image to represent the two exhibitions of students’ artwork– was a landscape photograph taken in early June by MFA student Dave LeRue, in which the skies offer an impossible light show of purple and gold behind a dark Icelandic mountain. Unretouched – #nofilter – the colour effect was by common understanding unlike anything any of us had ever seen elsewhere, certainly not in a southern Canadian city. This vivid sky was also as dark as any would get during our month of June in Blönduós, barely dark at all.

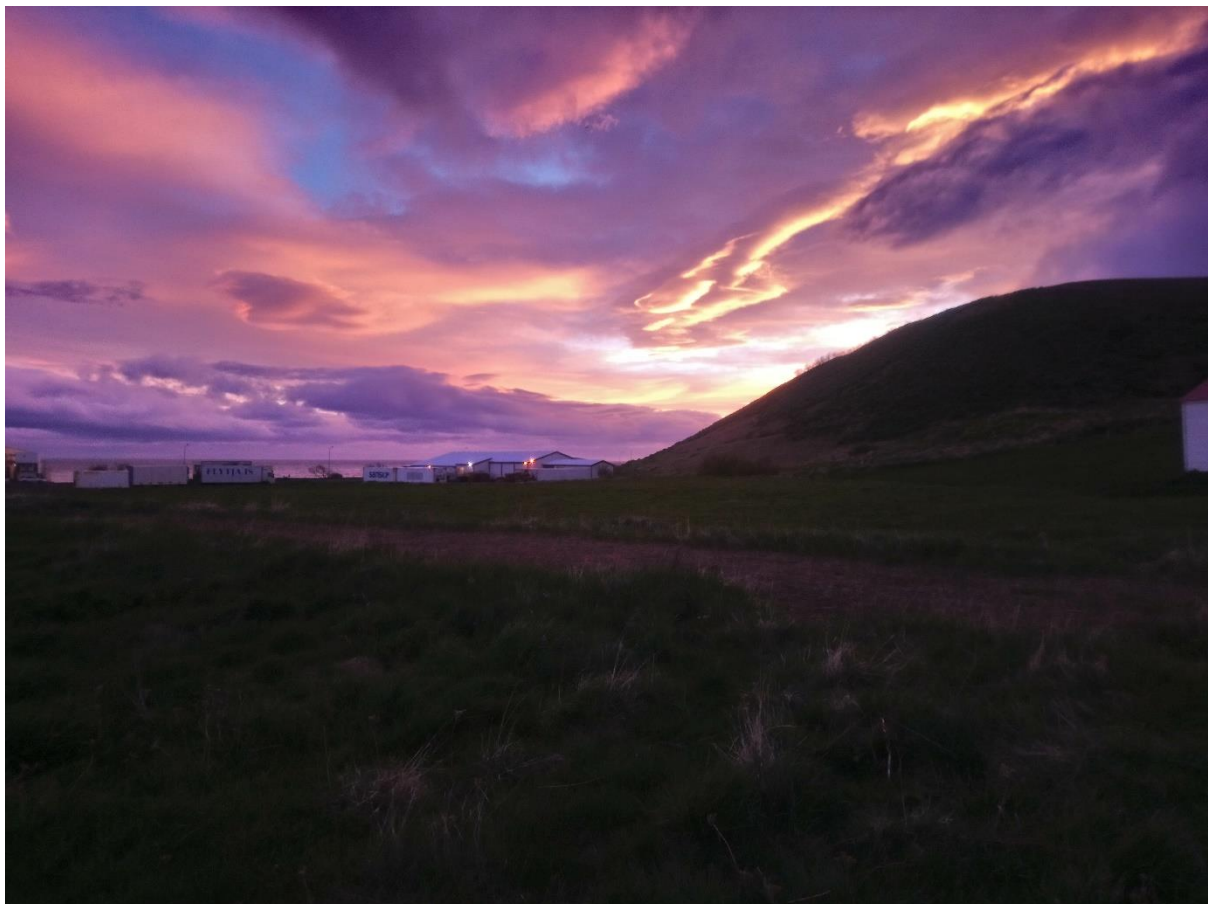


Figure 1. Dave LeRue (2018). Photo of Blönduós skyline.

The dramatic hues were not to be duplicated during our time in residence, but remained a collective touchstone, a basis of discussion about our location in this northern site of 24 hours of daylight. The

colours fueled the artist's own musings about the nature of his experience in Iceland. Referring to 18th century English philosopher Edmund Burke's contrast of the beautiful with the sublime (Burke and Boulton, 1987), LeRue wrote:

The sublime stems from our passions of fear, dealing with the rugged, the unexplored, and the dangerous. Sublime characteristics are found in vastness, infinity, and magnificence. The sublime instils awe by reminding the viewer of an imminent danger and the finality of death, without an actual present danger. (2018)

The specifics of the Icelandic context both supported and undermined the sense of the sublime: adjacent to the exceptional skies and light and the idyll of the protected bird nesting sites is the seaside slaughterhouse where sheep and horses are butchered and rendered, spewing bloody runoff into the sea. Up a back road is evidence of the extractivist activity of a gravel quarry, near a spot where the shells of dumped cars are gradually settling into their abandon. Our walks, further and further afield over the course of the month, took us past these functional and industrial sites, not at all part of the tourist brochures. But in terms of the Burkean sublime, it is true that we were not in personal danger, an important consideration in my choice of this location for the Field School. I needed the context to be predictably safe.

While all Field School participants spent significant time outside, one in particular, BFA student Chris Mendoza, took extensive daily walks-as-performances around Blönduós and in the Westfjords, a remote but relatively nearby part of the country. Mendoza created a body of short videos in which he reads aloud to the Iceland landscape – river, town, glacier – sharing words selected from an extensive anthology, *Open Country: Canadian Poetry in English*, (Lecker, 2008). Mendoza chose texts that drew on language or elements that he saw in the Icelandic terrain around him, even if they were written about other places around the globe. Mendoza aims to both question and celebrate the rhetoric and aesthetics of place-based creation. His artist's statement for the Blönduós end-of-residency exhibition explains,

These readings were first a means of spending time, of dwelling, in places I felt were tied to the poems, of inviting encounters. However, I also hoped to draw out and think through both similar and incongruent images of nature and the different ways of seeing landscape which a language developed in a foreign space would afford. Simultaneously the recording of these interventions was also a means of playing with the positioning of my body with respect to the landscape and to explore how we—as tourists, but also at “home”—construct depictions of landscapes through digital devices and our bodies as subjects. While all of these interventions were recorded this presentation consists in an edited selection of three videos taken during a trip to the Westfjords. These videos are accompanied by watercolour documentation of a larger selection of the interventions. (Mendoza, personal communications, 2018)



Figure 2. Chris Mendoza (2018). Still of Blönduós and Lupine // Smith and Scott (video 7:30)

In *Blönduós & Lupine // Smith & Scott* (2018), Mendoza positions himself in among the abundant purple flowers behind the Textile Center, and in the moody light reads two modernist Canadian poems, “The Lonely Land” by A.J.M. Smith (1978) and F.R. Scott’s lament for human mining in the “Laurentian Shield” (first published 1954).

BFA student Rythâ Kesselring worked in weaving and sound installation through her time in Blönduós. The photo of Kesselring creating a tapestry weaving in situ by the Drangajökull glacier (taken by fellow participant Meghan Riley) is featured on Concordia’s “Experiential Learning” website (Concordia University, n.d. (a)) and has become another kind of emblem of our shared orientation to Iceland’s outdoors.



Figure 3. RythÃ Kesselring weaving in plein air at Drangajökull, Westfjords. Photo: Meghan Riley.

Here, the photo stands in for the vast array of rich, nature-infused learning that the month's engagement in north Iceland offered students, Icelandic wool denoting iconic naturecultures. Icelandic wool also inspired Kesselring's in-studio research-creation. She conducted substantial research – material, historical, interview- and text-based – into historic wool weaving patterns, delving deep into ideas presented at the Knit Fest by weavers/cultural historians Marianne Tóvinnukona Guckelsberger and Marled Madder, who had spun, dyed and woven a speculative prototype of a Viking woman's dress based on close observation of archaeological fibre fragments (Guckelsberger and Mader, 2017). Kesselring learned that early Icelandic diamond twill weaving patterns were variations of Viking and Syrian practices, very specifically adapted to the north Iceland context. As the Icelandic Textile Center's expert weaver, Ragnheiður Björk Þórsdóttir, explained, early Icelanders living near the Arctic Circle had changed the Icelandic version pattern slightly, interrupting the repeat with a weft (cross) yarn in a regular "tabby" (one up, one down) weave to tighten the weave's hold on the fibres, adding warmth and density (quoted in Kesselring, 2018). Kesselring's own woven work drew on this variant Icelandic pattern, built from her enhanced knowledge of place, people and creatures.



Figure 4. Rythá Kesselring's installation of diamond twill and tufted weaving (left), with balls of handspun naturally dyed yarn (upper right) and weaving sampler (lower right) as installed in Blönduós (June 2018). Photo: Rythá Kesselring.

Of course, the development of meaningful creative experiments or completed artworks such as those described above was the primary course requirement of students' month of engagement in Blönduós. They also had one last text to submit: a summative self-evaluation that asked them to indicate what they felt they had contributed to the larger community during their tenure in Iceland, whether to their fellow Field School participants or to the Icelandic community more broadly. Knowing that they would have to conclude their coursework by explicitly considering their relationality, kept students partly attuned, I believe, to their positionality in Blönduós. Some wrote of the value of detaching themselves from their habitual ways of thinking – the true purpose of most artist residencies. Some indicated special efforts they'd made within the group, for instance, to facilitate the co-creation of meals in a small shared kitchen. Others indicated the range of beneficial impacts of learning with the people and place, as in PhD student Emily Keenlyside's reflection, here:

Deborah [Gray, the one non-Concordian in residence during June 2018, an expert spinner and knitter from Scotland] had said spinning can get addictive, and as I would set myself up in the studio each evening, I began to understand what she meant. Once I started, I didn't want to stop. Once I did stop, my midnight walk was my priority - taking in Blönduós from every perspective I could, talking with Rythá [fellow Iceland Field School participant] about spinning, weaving, dyeing, and learning. Early mornings,

when few people were awake, I wanted to hear stories of Scotland from Deborah, read Halldór Laxness's harrowing tale, *Independent People*, and practice my knitting samples. Jóhanna [Erla Pálmadóttir, director of the Residency] said her mother often told her that it was always worth it to undo and start over to fix your mistakes, and this quiet time gave me the space to do this. (Keenlyside, personal communications, 2018).

The kind of measured, thoughtful and reciprocal engagement voiced here exists throughout the Field School participants' texts and artworks, whether implicit or explicit. None mentioned post-humanist theory by name in any of their writing or conversation, but what I was looking for was rather the kind of enhanced connection that I proposed earlier might be the precursor to or signal for a kind of posthuman ethics, and for relational accountability. In subsequent reflections on my curriculum design, I wonder whether the students would have accrued more benefits – developed a more deeply understood relational accountability within their own practices and/or more language with which to articulate their positionality and/or more knowledge of posthuman theory – had I required them to write answers to our course's two guiding questions or brought them together for a conversation very specifically oriented to addressing them. I ask myself, If I continue, do I accentuate the environmental/posthumanist side of the curriculum, be more directive in requiring that students think explicitly with the questions I raise. What is gained in doing so? What is lost?

I will continue to ponder this, and to weigh the extent to which I am in my teaching (as I am in my research-creation) stuck in old habits of approach. I tend to prioritize students' individualized inner processes over their external articulation and process over product. Do these biases support my values or should I rethink the way I work?

I have two other larger questions that have emerged through this work, the first being the most basic of all.

Looking ahead

1. Do I continue? Is it possible to continue to travel to Iceland and still be true to the values that I describe as posthuman?

I am still wondering whether I should (ethically speaking) be traveling north with a group of Canadian students to Iceland. The island and its creatures remain very susceptible to human depredations; at what point will the prospect of adding to the tourist impact influence me against continuing the initiative? I don't know. I do know that I've recently recognized more specifically the environmental footprint of travel from Montreal to Blönduós, given the distance of more than 4000 kilometres and the need to travel by air and bus. The online Carbon Calculator suggests that for a Canadian, the roundtrip would incur about 0.56 metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions (Carbon Footprint Ltd., 2019). (A similar quotient would be incurred by travel from Montreal (at the 45th parallel) to the Canadian North (north of

60 degrees latitude): some destinations slightly closer to Montreal would have a smaller footprint, others, a larger one, given the distance between locations and the need to fly.) By opting for travel to the distant north, we potentially boost our own individual environmental footprints even higher than the average 22 tonnes of greenhouse gas per year per Canadian, the highest of all G20 countries (Climate Transparency, 2018). We didn't specifically address these issues in the 2018 implementation, an oversight that I will remedy if I implement the Field School again. I will also ask the office of Concordia International, which organizes multiple field schools, how it is addressing this issue of the environmental footprint of field school travel and if there is no plan in place, suggest that we find a way to create one. Can carbon offsets make a difference? Or is there another mode of redress that would feel more legitimate?

I will also contact Icelandic environmental organizations to ask whether there is something that members of the Iceland Field School could actually do while there to make a positive contribution. If we are making a real difference on Iceland's environmental side, then that will weigh in the balance of my deliberations.

2. If I continue, are there ways that in my own activities with respect to the Field School and in Iceland I can emphasize posthuman values?

I've realized during my reflections here that were I to keep some version of an artist-researcher-educator's notebook during the experience, I'd have more on-site observation/reflection to draw on in developing a subsequent case study iteration. Of course, I would want to concurrently be considering what constituted data in this regard, working forward a posthuman perspective on research that does not foreground human experience at the expense of all other.

In addressing these questions I will consider how better to align my teaching in Iceland with my posthuman values, essentially working to decolonize my mind and practices to allow me to live more fully my understanding of the interconnectedness of all things, and the special role of making visible that the arts can play in this time of ecological grief.

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