

# research spotlight



## Crafting Environmental Citizens

Matthew K. Limb

I never intended to devote my doctoral studies toward the environment. When I began my Ph.D. in California in 2015, my research interests pertained to questions of materiality, queerness, sexual futures, and craft. For me, the process of a dissertation continues to be an endless lesson in the art of letting go and allowing for change and the unexpected.

During the summer of 2018, I embarked on a three-week research trip across the southwestern United States. At the Ceramic Research Center (CRC) on the campus of Arizona State University and the archives of the New Mexico Museum of Art, I hoped to find a few gems that would bolster my project on queer craftspeople in the American West, AIDS, and the potentiality of tactility and the surface of an object as a site for sexual expression. I found nothing. During the 937-mile drive through deserts and red rock mountains from Santa Fe to Santa Barbara, I agonized over what to tell my advisor.

Driving in the American West begs you to contemplate the landscape and your own connection to it. Somewhere near the Arizona border, I recalled an image published in a catalogue by the then-Pasadena Museum of Art for their exhibition series *California Design* showing ceramic vessels photographed in the desert. This image and the long drive through the surreal and majestic landscape ahead of me prompted my recollection of a series of scans I took in the CRC on a whim because I found them unusual. In the Summer 1974 issue of *Studio Potter* magazine, a periodical aimed toward practicing potters in the United States operating small-scale production, the editor Paul Soldner focused the publication on the relationship

between studio ceramics production and the emerging environmental movement. The needs of the ecologically-minded craftsperson ranged from alternative energy sources (atomic, solar, wind), the ethical sourcing of materials, and spiritually-infused practices aimed at giving back to the Earth.

Through centering environmental concerns in craft production and its objects, a network of issues quickly surfaced: materiality, technology, land use, (de)colonization, race, place, urban/rural, national and global politics, citizenship, and economics. For example, the materiality of studio craft (ceramics, glass, metalwork, fibers, and woodworking) necessitate a direct connection to the land, and its processes utilize both organic and natural materials. Whether this be plant fibers within textiles, the innards of animals for basketry, or minerals for ceramic glazes, craft provides a unique lens to explore an object's relationship to the earth. However, whose craft and whose earth? Histories of American studio craft are predominately white and rarely explore Native American makers who, through philosophy and the adoption of processes, were crucial in shaping how craftspeople in the United States thought about and engaged with the land. The association of Native Americans with ecological concerns and an environmentally based citizenship was further reinforced (and complicated) through images in the popular magazine *Life*, the counterculture publication *Whole Earth Catalog*, art periodicals like *Studio Potter*, and advertisements of the so-called "Crying Indian."

This project seeks to explore how artists, craftspeople, and designers engaged in environmental problems across a fractured political, social, economic, cultural, and racial landscape. It centers Native American voices as stewards of the land, identifies how white artists turned toward indigenous systems of knowledge to combat an existential threat to our planet, and complicates the construction of the ecological citizen. The artistic production occurring on communes, reservations, and small cottage industries dotting the American West created networks between Native Americans and white makers. I emphasize the agency of indigenous peoples and complicate the collaboration/appropriation that occurred between these groups in the hopes of moving toward a decolonized history of craft and land use.

By choosing craft as a lens for environmental concerns, I emphasize the importance of the local and the intimacy inherent in these objects. Be it a ceramic cup, a woven wall-hanging, a basket made from wild grasses, or a wood-turned bowl, these are objects that make connections to the materiality of a place on a scale designed for the human hand and human-sized dwellings. The small scale and the preponderance of craftspeople sourcing local materials works in tandem with environmental preservation rather than actively disrupting the landscape it is built upon.

Like nearly every other aspect of contemporary life, my research was derailed by the novel coronavirus. A year ago, I received a grant to conduct dissertation research during Spring 2020. I packed up my apartment and hit the road on March 17<sup>th</sup>—the same day Governor Gavin Newsom shut down the state of California. It became clear that the research trip I planned would not be possible. Like the frustration that comes with writing a dissertation, COVID-19 has been a lesson in letting go, allowing room for growth and change, and finding creative approaches to research. No dissertation is written in a vacuum. The virus has disproportionately impacted indigenous communities and other communities of color that lack adequate access to medical facilities and experience environmental racism, creating worsened health conditions. The murder of George Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis by police officers, renewed the national conversation on racial justice for Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and further illustrated the very real conditions of the structure of white supremacy. Our current moment feels incredibly relevant to my research. It has required self-reflection and interrogation as to how, I, a white, queer, non-binary, first-generation college student could complete this project without enacting further violence upon these communities and use it to empower BIPOC voices. It will not be easy; I have much to learn and will make mistakes, but it is vital that we tell these stories.

Since moving to California, I have experienced wildfires, mudslides, drought, oil spills, heat waves, and other consequences of climate change. The world we inhabit is warming and has produced the dire conditions the western United States faces year after year. It is crucial that we learn and remember this history in order to enact environmental justice, craft a sustainable future, and build a better world for everyone.