

Witness Tree Project, Australia
Memory, Place and Cultural Ecology
SEMINAR SYLLABUS

Course Dates

January 10 – February 1, 2020

General Project Description

The Witness Tree Project is an ongoing curricular initiative at Rhode Island School of Design, in which students, in a joint history seminar and studio, work with trees that have “witnessed” key events, trends, and people in history. In addition to classroom study and studio work, the Project variously involves field trips, guest lectures, exhibitions of students’ work, and other events that highlight the significance of material culture, art, and design in learning about history, place, and public memory. After ten years of focusing on witness trees in the United States, in conjunction with the National Park Service, the Witness Tree Project will now explore possibilities of applying the framework internationally, starting with Australia.

Course Description

When European colonizers arrived in the area that is now Adelaide, Australia, home to the Kaurna people, they brought with them ideas about the environment that literally altered the landscape and deeply affected indigenous life and culture. In this joint studio and seminar, students will engage in scholarly investigation, field work, and making artifacts to create insight about changing indigenous and settler conceptions of the environment, historical dialogues about land, and competing ideologies of place, borders, roots, and movement. In particular, the course will focus on selected trees of South Australia, which stand as historical witnesses to these changes, from the ancient red gum used by indigenous Australians for canoes, bowls, medicine, and marking to the English oak and other non-native species introduced by settlers to shape the controlled aesthetic of Adelaide’s many parks and gardens.

Adelaide Botanic Gardens, which is in walking distance to student accommodations, will serve as an epicenter for the course. The Gardens have a number of special collections, to which the public do not usually have access, that can enhance the students’ study, including the Living Collection, the State Herbarium, and the Seed Centre. The Botanic Gardens will also be the site for the course’s final exhibition of student work. Finally, the joint RISD studio and seminar will include collaborative opportunities presented by a simultaneous studio course offered by Professor Peter Walker, of University of South Australia. Shared fieldwork trips and critiques will provide various ways for students from RISD and UniSA to learn together.

Credits

Students will receive 6 credits, 3 in History, Philosophy, and the Social Sciences and 3 in Furniture Design

Course Learning Outcomes

In the Witness Tree Project, students will:

- Understand changing and conflicting nature-culture relationships and their effects in Southern Australia.
- Learn about cultures and histories of indigenous Australians, settlers, and other migrants in Oceania, past and present.
- Develop familiarity with the practices of observational, experiential, and scholarly research.
- Learn how to articulate positions on issues, in both informal discussions and formal debate.
- Explore how historical research might animate and shape art and design.
- Gain confidence in navigating a new environment, including the flexibility and openness to unexpected types of learning.
- Practice the interpersonal skills necessary for gracious group travel and cross-cultural engagement.

Evaluation

The following factors will determine your final grade:

- Participation 10% (You are required to attend all classes, no excuses. This is an intensive course experience; missing a class due to illness will require a clear proposal and plan for catch-up)
- Journal 20%
- Reflection Paper 40%
- In-Class Debate 30%

General Calendar

Mornings: drawing, lectures, discussion

Afternoons: field trips, studio exploration and work

*Journal

You should begin keeping a record of your encounters with trees, responses to course readings, etc. We will have periodic check-ins, as a way to discuss first encounters, impressions, and possibilities for further research and thinking.

Helpful Web Sites:

Adelaide - <http://adelaide.sa.gov.au>

Adelaide City Explorer - <https://adelaidecityexplorer.com.au>

Adelaide Botanic Gardens - <https://www.botanicgardens.sa.gov.au/home>

UniSA School of Art, Architecture, and Design - <https://aad.unisa.edu.au>

Registered Tree Finder -

<https://trusttrees.org.au/search?keywords=&location=Adelaide&type=0&criteria=0&level=0&fromDate=&toDate=&fromHeight=&toHeight=&measuredDate=&fromAge=&toAge=&condition=0#>

Common Ground (culture, history, and reconciliation) - <https://www.commonground.org.au/learn>

Songlines Audio Journey, from *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* exhibit (National Museum Australia, 2018) -

<https://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/songlines>)

Awake podcast (aboriginal arts and culture) - <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/>

Ask Us Anything: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHVbVBLhCM>

January 3-8 Course Reading Before Arrival in Australia: History and Place

Emily J. Petit. "Aborigines' Dreaming or Britain's Terra Nullius: Perceptions of Land Use in Colonial Australia." *Iowa Historical Review* (Vol 5, Issue 1, 2015): 23-60.

Glynis Ridley, "Losing America and Finding Australia: Continental Shift in an Enlightenment Paradigm." *Eighteenth-Century Life* (Volume 26, Number 3, Fall 2002): 202-224.

Hilary Whitehouse, "Talking Up Country: Language, Natureculture and Interculture in Australian Environmental Education Research." *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2011): 56-67.

Tom Griffiths. "The Transformative Craft of Environmental History: Perspectives on Australian Scholarship." *RCC Perspectives* No. 2, (2017), pp. 115-124.

January 10 Introduction

Discussion of History and Place readings

January 13 Witnessing Trees

Colloff, Matthew. "River Red Gum Consciousness." From *Flooded Forest and Desert Creek: Ecology and History of the River Red Gum*. Csiro Publishing, 2014. (accessed at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277325558_Flooded_Forest_and_Desert_Creek_Ecology_and_History_of_the_River_Red_Gum)

Brett M. Bennett, "A Global History of Australian Trees." *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, (Spring 2011), pp. 125-145.

January 14 Shaping Ecologies

Sheila Collingwood-Whittick. "Ways of Seeing 'Country': Colonial, Post-Colonial, and Indigenous Perceptions of the Australian Landscape." *LiNQ*, Vol. 35 (2008): 59-77.

Muller, Samantha. "'Two Ways': Bringing Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Knowledges Together." In *Country, Native Title and Ecology*, edited by Weir Jessica K, 59-80. ANU Press, 2012.

*Journal Check

January 15 Negotiating Territory

Hal Wootten, "Resolving disputes over Aboriginal sacred sites: Some experiences in the 1990s." From *Negotiating the Sacred: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in a Multicultural Society*. Ed by Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Kevin White. ANU Press, 2006.

Grace Koch, "We Have the Song, So We Have the Land: Song and Ceremony as Proof of Ownership in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Claims." AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper, Number 33 (July 2013).

*Field Trip: South Australian Museum

January 16 Protecting Heritage

Denis Byrne, "Deep Nation: Australia's Acquisition of an Indigenous Past." *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 20 (1996): 82-107.

Jane L. Lennon, "Sustaining Australia's Cultural Landscapes." *Landscape Journal: design, planning, and management of the land*, Volume 35, Number 2 (2016): 271-286.

January 17 Debate

*Topic TBA

January 20 Creating Landmarks

Rob Amery and Georgina Yambo Williams, "Reclaiming Through Renaming: The Reinstatement of Kurna Toponyms in Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains." From *The Land is a Map: Placenames of Indigenous Origin in Australia*, ed. by Luise Hercus, Flavia Hodges, and Jane Simpson. ANU Press (2009): 255-276.

Hay, Iain, Andrew Hughes, and Mark Tutton. "Monuments, Memory and Marginalisation in Adelaide's Prince Henry Gardens." *Geografiska Annaler*. Series B, Human Geography 86, no. 3 (2004): 201-16.

*Journal Check

January 21 Seminar Review

*Field Trip: Kurna Walk

*Reflection Paper due on January 24

Based on the readings, which have dealt with issues ranging from ecological perception to land rights, choose a particular event, past or present, that demonstrates differing cultural understandings of "place" in Australia. It may be, for instance, a first encounter, a settlement, a legal case, a protest, or a social initiative, that focuses on land rights, approaches to environmental stewardship, mobility, etc. Do research on the event and write a paper (6-8 pages) that explores the key issues, their resolution, and the potential for understanding, more broadly, ideologies of human-culture relationship in Australia.

January 22-31 Completion of Studio Work