

**Faculty Development Grant
The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Conference
Maggie Light, Spring 2023**



Maggie Light

ASLE

Speaker

eBadge

On July 8th, I left my three-year-old with my husband and hopped on a plane for Portland Oregon. My mission was to speak on the “Stories of Contamination, Extinction, and Marginal Places” Panel at the annual conference for the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE). What made my mission possible was a Faculty Development Grant. I’m so grateful to Otis College of Art & Design for their support. This grant let me share my work (a reading from my current manuscript POLAR OPPOSITES) and let me learn from fellow writers and scholars in the environmental humanities.

The ASLE conference is a mix of educators, artists, scientists, activists, scholars, students, and concerned citizens. There are panels and workshops on solarpunk, indigenous methodologies, theorizing sciences, climate distress, ecocriticism pedagogy. Anything pertaining to environmental justice, natural spaces, energy systems, or the health, joy, and anguish of a very sick planet. The theme of this year’s conference was Reclaiming the Commons, and for the first time it was held jointly with The Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AEES). This meant even more dynamic forms of interdisciplinary collaboration.

My “Stories of Contamination, Extinction and Marginal Places” panel was on the first day and I was anxious. I could tell from the event website my work was different in tone from the other panelists. This manuscript is indeed a story of contamination, but it’s also a Young Adult Cli-Fi

Romcom and the passage I'd selected was the meet-cute. ASLE is a welcoming community, but did I really want to read a piece of commercial fiction alongside such serious scholars?

Luckily, once the talks began, my curiosity in the other-panelists' work overwhelmed my self-centered nerves. Stacey Balkun, A PhD candidate at University of Mississippi, whose dissertation is on the eco-poetics of sinking fields, shared narrative poetry from her book *Sweetbitter*, which explores her childhood home near a red chemical pond. She showed satellite images of the red pollution pit and the adjacent swimming pool where she played every day of every summer. Allison Hargreaves, a 'settler scholar' in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at the University of British Columbia shared on the transformative power of building decolonial relationships with place. What if those of us who identified as descendants of colonizers considered ourselves as guests on the land? What would responsive guesthood look like?

Allison and Stacey's confidence was infectious. Walking up to the podium, I reminded myself of the value in my own story. Yes, it's a meet-cute, but it's also shrouded in climate emotions, set amidst a wildfire evacuation, where there is such an imbalance of wealth that the bubbles of privilege and ignorance are finally starting to pop. And yet, these young adults still manage to find love and laughter as they face the inconvenient truths. This story is also my attempt to break free from the sanctimony that has been so stultifying in environmentalist movements. One of the inquiries from the ASLE Conference website asked how the work of the environmental humanities could become more influential politically and culturally. What if laughter and the relentless capacity for young people to fall in love can influence something?

My Reading:

Light, Maggie, *Polar Opposites: Prologue*, 1-9:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kzltbtuRbhLTpuS9WHdQ0upHlEww96xz/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100499974171118926619&rtpof=true&sd=true>



Fellow panelist snapped a pic

But, as is often the case at a good conference, I got more than I gave. There were too many edifying, delightfully subversive talks to list here, so I'll limit myself to a couple encounters.

First off, I met my hero. Nicole Seymour, Associate Professor of Environmental Humanities at Cal State Fullerton was eating breakfast one table away. She's the author of *Bad Environmentalism; Irony and Irreverence in an Ecological Age*, which I teach in my Human Nature course and which has guided most of my climate curriculum. And Seymour's third book, *Glitter: An Object Lesson*, examines the great glitter backlash of 2017 (microplastic!) and the gender-bending Glam Rock or 'Glitter Rock' of the 70s (David Bowie!). It's the perfect introduction to the semiotic analysis paper I assign the Otis College Foundation course, Ways of Knowing. I swallowed the rest of my muffin and introduced myself. I told her I'm a superfan, and how, as luck would have it, my students in my summer Ways of Knowing course were reading her that very week. I told her how her scholarship celebrating works of anti-sentimentalism and abjection about climate have shaped my writing, my activism, my lesson plans, and even my relationships with family members back in Virginia (many of whom have different beliefs about climate). Seymour was patient with my monologue of thanks and I got to hear more of her work at her panel later that day. Her talk was on asexual ecologies – the science community's classification and lack of study on mushrooms and sponges mimic how wider culture often considers asexuality in humans. She invited us to notice when we link a behavior with an identity and when we privilege sexual attraction over the sensory. I offered these ideas to my students the following week, some of whom identify as asexual and all of whom had much to add on the current conversations around mushrooms.

As gratifying as sharing my writing and meeting my eco-scholar-hero were, the peak experience of this conference was a panel on energy systems. And I never would have known to attend this presentation (there are many panels co-occurring) if I hadn't forced myself to go to the cocktail hour. I really didn't want to go. I was tired. I didn't know anyone. I don't drink. And this was my first trip alone since my son was born—the last trip had been this same conference in 2019, while I was pregnant with him. Didn't I deserve some me-time? But I walked by the tents and crowds of strangers and felt that tug of obligation.

By the dessert table I met Délice Williams, Associate Professor at University of Delaware. Délice didn't know many people at the conference either. We chatted about the keynote and the classroom and the mess of life. She invited me to her panel. Her talk was called Oil and Water and it would be her contribution to a forthcoming collection published by MLA called "Teaching Energy Humanities".

Délice's talk was crafted after a course she taught. She provided her syllabus and reading list, texts they read through an energy humanist lens, considering the specific energy sources of oil and water. The most energizing (pun intended) part of her presentation was the final project she assigns: Dive, Float, Ripple, and Splash. Dive is research. Float is reflect. Ripple is the impacts beyond the classroom. Splash is the creative plunge—a poster, a playlist, a piece of art.

‘How is petroleum depicted as a promise?’ That’s a question she poses to her students. Délice used the example of the opening theme song to the 80s show Dallas. A montage of big houses, big boots, big hair, big taffeta gowns—but no black crude. It’s as clean as oil rigs are dirty. The night I got back from the conference, I watched an episode of the Hulu series The Bear. The future of Carmen’s new restaurant hinges on their fire suppression test. They keep failing it. The gas keeps leaking. In the eleventh hour they pass! Their restaurant dreams come true! There’s such hope as they fire up the gas grill and fry the thick slabs of beef. All of these energy and food systems are currently plunging us deeper into climate chaos, and yet the promise for all of these characters and all of our favorite restaurants and all of us watching and eating and wanting more still burns bright. We are past due for solar and wind and electrification, but it’s foolish to deny what is here and now, causing such pain, and yet still fueling our dreams, whether we admit it or not. Délice and I exchanged contact information and she’s agreed to be a guest speaker should I get approved for a new class, inspired in great part by her work and the contributions from the other panelists (my working title for a course proposal is ‘Exploring Power’).

I’m so grateful for this grant, for the connections I made—the conceptual and the human. And even with all the presentations and networking, I still slipped away for some me-time.



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