Refuge

Erin Mallea
2019

- environmental difficulty/outside forces
- WAITING 4 GODOT
- systems we live in can't do what they proclaim
- US FISH + Wild. NOT USGS
- STANDARDS
- "Trapped" in larger socioeconomic systems
- FRIGHT FUL
- privatization
- "PRISTINE" landscape/as related to U.S. National PARK relationship to Nature
- MISTAKES : YEARLONG SHIFTS IN management plans
- Failed ATTEMPTS TO FIX problems
- Fertilizer people never showed up all summer
- "PROBLEMS : SOLUTIONS"
- responsibility to those implicated in what has been set in motion
- HUMAN ERROR VS. ENGINEERED SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS
- ADAM + EVE : OWNERSHIP OF LAND/animals
- EDEN
- ARCADIA
- DIVINE RIGHT
- UTOPIAN VISIONS
- BARBED WIRE
- time before
- POISONING H2O
- "presumptuous VISITOR"
- "cat + mouse game"
- Inherited MISTAKES/PROBLEMS
- GOV'T INCENTIVES FOR INDUSTRY
- "staying with the TROUBLE" - HARAWAY
- INTIMIDATION
- "EAT THE CARP" CAMPAIGN
- AUTHORITY IMAGINED, INVENTED, CRUMBLING, FORCED ON OTHERS
- immigration
- Nationalism
- "invasiveness"
- ATTEMPTS AT COLLECTIVITY
- HIGH DESERT PARTNERSHIP
- "INNOCULATION AGAINST THE BUNDY VIRUS"
- CARP dinner w/ STAFF
- Xenophobia
- MIGRATION—human/animal
- CARP
- "Natural" ORDER
- HAMMONDS ARSONISTS
- PICNIC ROBBERY
- VS
- THOUGHT COYOTES WERE MILITIA
- Shelly's reaction being criticized
- "Trash FISH"
- "Threat"
- "big FISH EAT little FISH"
- GHOST TOWNS
- "self sufficiency"
- I've never ... a large animal ...
- Sustenance VS. Gluttony
- "Naturalized"
- "progress"
- BUNDYS : MILITIA
- SELFISHNESS
- Cowboy myths
- "UNDERMINING Natural ORDER"
- "FEDS"
- DON'T TREAD ON ME
- single species conservation attempts VS. more collective
- "Gluttony of the market"
- Audubon FOUNDED by TEDDY ROOSEVELT
- birds 4 FASHION
- "MISFORTUNE"
- GAMIFYING
- "BIRD lobby"
- OUTSIDER/
- me
- MY FAMILY
- ethics of ?
- Trying to FIT lbs of CARP in small bucket
- "REFUGE"
- "Safe HAVEN"? For what? WHOM?
- WILDLIFE "MANAGEMENT"
- TRAP
- MASS GRAVE/ extermination
- bird watching
- BIRDS
- environmentalists/birders VS. BUNDYS
- LAND AS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL VS. recreation
- CONTROL
- VS LACK OF
- RANCHING
- Histories of colonialism : imperialism
- VS. SCIENCE
- genocide
- AUDUBON
- MOM WANTS TO BE A BLUE BIRD
- Massive scale of our problems
- the sitting almost stuck in TRAP
- CONSERVATION
- environmentalism
- Paiute Tribe
- Disappearance
- Nicholas Rod
- khaki/outdoor clothing as uniform
- climate change
- "OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND"
- ENSNARE
- class tension
- INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE : "invasiveness"
- "ROOTED"
- Theresa
- Displacement/loss
- short-term thinking
- Timelines
- macro : micro
- FEAR!
- ATTEMPTS to deal w/ carp seem in DENIAL of scale/reality
- "PROBE"—shocked that whacking sagebrush was pitiful
- Blue bird/ BIRDS FADING INTO SKY
- pheasant nesting/rituals— 1000s of years in same place
- presumptuous visitor
- HUMAN VS. GEOLOGIC
- "PROBLEMS : SOLUTIONS" LEAD TO MORE PROBLEMS : MORE/NEW "SOLUTIONS"
- QUOTE FROM ANNA: "I thought I was communicating w/ birds but I was actually just hitting two rocks together"
- WRONG tools
- SMOKE
- VS. climate disaster
- ASHES
- DEATH
- MASS EXTINCTION
- "literal, familial, symbolic, cultural"
- HUMAN-CENTRIC VS. HOW small we really are
- instilling it in others VS. ACTING OUT OF
- hippie guy that was literally ...

My mom once told me that she would like to come back as a blue-bird in another life. I like to picture her catching a draft and floating higher into the air, free to embrace a different relationship to gravity.

My father is an avid bird-watcher. During my childhood my family travelled to Malheur Wildlife Refuge to witness the seasonal bird migration. Malheur encompasses 187,757 acres of habitat and is located in the arid, high-mountain desert of Eastern Oregon in the Western United States – a crucial stop for thousands of migratory birds traveling along the Pacific Flyway.

In 1908 the refuge was established as a sanctuary for waterfowl and other migratory birds after many populations were hunted to near extinction in the United States.

My dad grew up a few hours drive from Malheur. He has visited the refuge for 40 years and wants his ashes scattered there. For years, my siblings and I have known that we will someday make a trip there in remembrance and grief. Like generations of birds, I will be called to return to the region’s marshes, streams, and sagebrush grasslands.

The creation of the refuge only provided sanctuary for some. Its conception further institutionalized the then recent, violent removal of the Wadatika Band of Northern Paiutes from their ancestral homelands.

Trappers called the local river “Riviere au Malheur” – “unfortunate river” – after their furs and other property were stolen. The French namesake foreshadows a relationship to the land defined by control, profit, and extractive booms and busts.

In 2018, I organized a self-created artist residency and work exchange at Malheur as an opportunity to learn more about the region’s contested land-use politics. From June through early August, I received housing in exchange for assisting ecologists on surveys and conservation projects.

The seasonal influx of birders at Malheur highlights the economic disparities and varied relationships to land within the region. The often wealthy bird tourists from Seattle and Portland (aka "Westsiders") make clear the distinction between those with time for leisure and those with less. Some locals are disgruntled by the imposition of "Westsider" attitudes and regulation. They criticize lopsided environmental funding and assumptions that the same approaches used in western Oregon will work out east. Others resent that eco-tourists can come and go: it's easier to be an environmentalist when your relationship to the land is largely recreational.

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In 2016, some of this regional tension became national news when Malheur was occupied by the Bundy family and their supporters. Heavily armed with weapons and a "Don't Tread on Me" cowboy conservatism, the group of anti-government ranchers and militants advocated for the dissolution of federally owned public lands and a transfer to states and private interests.

The Bundy family has been involved in a number of violent conflicts with the Bureau of Land Management and owes over $1,000,000 in withheld cattle grazing taxes. The family gained stardom in regions of the rural West and reactionary corners of the internet. Despite the 40-day occupation in which they caused millions of dollars worth of damages and irreversible damage of Native artifacts, the occupation leaders were acquitted of any criminal wrongdoing in January 2018.

POSTED
NO TRESPASSING
KEEP OUT
GO HOME
BundYS!!

According to the Bundys, people like them are becoming less and less a priority in the eyes of the government and larger economy. Settlement by white homesteaders, ranchers, and farmers was long incentivized in the American West as a method to broaden American territory, clear out Native peoples, and expand profit for particular industries.

Today, many family ranches are feeling the financial impact of increased regulation, grazing fees, and competition with large scale, corporate ranching. The Bundys claim it is their right to use the land as they see fit, without oversight or accountability. Whether emboldened by faith in privatization or fear of being squeezed out, they responded with militancy.

9. Taylor's
14.
10. Walt McEwen
15.

The Burns Paiute Tribe held a press conference in response to the Malheur occupation. Leaders of the tribe called out the occupiers' blatant oversight of America's colonial history and emphasized that the land belongs to the tribe who never ceded their rights. Their ancestors lived, traveled, and thrived in the region for at least 6,000 years before European conquest and domination. The tribe reminded the Bundys that they continue to live amidst contemporary marginalization in the wake of devastating cultural and human losses.

While I was at the refuge, Donald Trump pardoned the local ranchers whose case inspired the occupation. The Bundys and their followers returned to Malhuer to celebrate. Refuge staff and volunteers were instructed to evacuate. We were told to conceal any affiliation with US Fish and Wildlife for fear that we could be harassed or intimidated.

Staff and locals were wary when I asked about the occupation. I was another outsider with a camera. Many wanted to move on and had grown tired of being studied news subjects. Most Malheur staff that experienced the occupation left in its wake. They had been threatened and followed by armed occupiers – it was deeply personal and traumatic. Others spoke with more distance and cited the occupation as just one more event in a long and continuing history of conflict for control.

In December 2018, the Bundys left the far right movement. Many of their followers saw them as ideological traitors when they defended the rights of migrants seeking refuge in the United States. The family's willingness to adjust to the needs of others was not seen as an asset. Their followers quickly disavowed them.

Malheur is famed as a "crowned jewel" within the birding community. However, not all refuge inhabitants receive equal adoration. U.S. Fish and Wildlife has been entrenched in a struggle of their own making since the 1950s. Common Carp, now considered an invasive species, were introduced throughout the country by the U.S. Fish Commission in the mid and late 1800s. With few predators, carp lay millions of eggs per year with a 90% success rate. Though research varies on how drastically they have altered the ecosystem, carp pose a notable threat for bird habitat by consuming and altering critical food sources. Given the importance of birds to the refuge's mission and funding, diminishing bird habitat is something its leadership cannot accept.

In the 1950s, the refuge utilized military grade tactics against the carp. 640 gallons of poison were sprayed from a converted WWII torpedo bomber into Malheur Lake. Within a few years, the carp population made a full recovery. Contemporary biologists speculate that not all aquatic species were as resilient.

Today, Estimates say that Malheur's lakes, rivers, and streams are filled with millions of carp. During my entire time at the refuge we emptied the carp trap every day and caught 2,508 fish. The task quickly felt like a fool's errand. Staff seemed trapped in a system of tireless and violent labor. Day after day we watched the fish gasp for air and felt them struggle in our hands.

While conservation tactics have evolved, biologists continue to spend an incredible amount of resources testing and exhausting new approaches to population reduction. Some Malheur biologists are resigned to a career of carp and human damage control, knowing they can never fully reverse the problem only try to stop it from getting worse.

Other biologists wonder how much longer common carp will be targeted, noting that many introduced species become "naturalized", and that there are much bigger fish to fry, so to speak. Others, however, see the issue as partially a public relations problem. The defamation of carp, while rooted in the reality of ecological change, is deeply connected to a rhetoric of xenophobia and otherness. While carp are enjoyed as a food source throughout the world and introduced to the United States as such, they have been condemned by many as "trash fish" not worthy of upwardly mobile, white American palates.

At Malheur, the carp trap feels like a decoy made for its human operators. The apparatus seems to entrap staff into a particular methodology more than it entrapps the fish it is designed to target: a device to convince ourselves that we are rectifying our mistakes and are in control.

Over the summer I noticed one biologist was criticized for expressing sympathy toward the carp and other "problem" species. Her sensitivity was seen as ignorant by those who continually reminded us that "invasiveness" is a biological fact.

Perhaps the trap allows us to deny and avoid the necessary and relevant questions: who and what become disposable? Who is allowed to move freely and with ease? Who are invaders? Whose success is seen as "natural" and whose is seen as a threat?

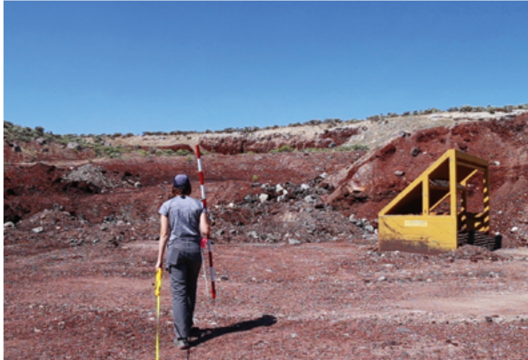
BIG
R
STORES

ECCE
Hieronymus Bos.
inventor
P
ME
COCK · EXCV · 1557
GRANDIBVS EXIGVI SVNT PISCES PISCIBVS ESCA ·
Siet sone dit hebbe ick zeer langhe ghe weten / dat die groote vissen de cleyne eten

Many Native American ecologists have a different perspective on invasive species. Their critiques of the term come from the notion that all living beings are human kin. Accountability lies in "invasive" ideologies such as Euro-American property ownership regimes and top-down "command and control" forms of environmental management, rather than the fault of specific animals or plants.

Instead, they emphasize a responsive ethic of care that incorporates learning from the introduced species, finding uses for them, and working to adapt and live with such changes.

Before I left the refuge, staff threw me a goodbye party. After months of trying to convince my new friends to eat carp, they acquiesced. I was grateful they were willing to suspend disbelief and normalize eating the fish if only for an afternoon.



It has been several generations since my family's livelihood was tied so intimately to the earth. Once farmers, miners, and sheep-herders, my great grandparents left remote mountains, dust bowls, and what are now ghost towns in response to shifting environmental, economic, and political conditions. I have inherited a privilege of movement from these family members. Like the birds and birders at Malheur, I could come and go as I pleased. I could be in awe of the landscape and the expansive sky without being entrenched in the local politics or anxieties about the changing climate and economy. I was free to speculate about larger questions without having to be trapped within them or live fully under their weight.

One afternoon I used surveying tools to measure the distance to the horizon and how long it took to disappear beyond it. It was an exercise in remembering my scale and the impossibility of fully understanding or tracking a history and space so much larger than me.

On the way to Malheur, my dad and I visited his father in a nursing home. My dad had been acting as a part-time caretaker for his parents over the last few years but recently decided he needed more help than he could provide. My dad speaks about the difficulty of caring for his parents. Yet, he often sighs and concludes, "I guess it's just biology".

Like the refuge scientists, I suppose it's easier to accept or deny something when we can neatly categorize and dissect it from the safety of distance. As we left, my dad said to me in sorrow and certainty, "by the time I'm his age I want to be in the stomach of some bird halfway to the Arctic – or whatever's left of it."

When we arrived near the refuge, my dad and I dug a small amount of earth at the bank of the Silvies River where he wants his ashes scattered. We gathered 100 oz, the approximate weight of his future remains and designed an urn together – a vessel to be made of the clay we dug from the river bed. One day, his body will be the reciprocal for the volume of earth we took. I know these actions won't change or help grief when death comes. It's just a small attempt to grapple with change and disappearance, to learn to live with it, to adjust and respond with collective care.

A Conversation with My Dad about Making his Urn Together and Taking Care of his Parents

January, 2019

Erin: What was your reaction to my idea of digging up dirt at Malheur together? And when I suggested making an urn?

Mike: Initially, I thought that the dirt we dug in the glass jar was going to represent my ashes. It wasn’t until later that I realized we were actually going to use that dirt to create an urn. So that’s one reason – until I really under-stood – that I just thought [laughing] we could throw any dirt in the jar because it didn’t really matter [laughs].

I liked the area along the Silvies River we visited. I like the notion that part of that place will be made into a container. I thought the incorporation of everyone [your mom and siblings] giving ideas and things was healthy – it’s good for people to plan or talk about these

things – to think about what the future might be. It's nice to have death be thought of as you would a birth or a wedding, I think it can make it more meaningful for everyone involved.

I think your mom and I have talked a lot about death and dying over the years – mostly about others: patients and most recently her father and our sisters. Since you and I started this discussion your mom and I solidified some plans for some songs and other things we'd like for a future funeral service. I think having a more open conversation with everyone has been positive.

And I never really thought that a trip to dig dirt at Malheur could be turned to an artwork.

I was thinking in response to your questions about why Malheur was so interesting to me. I think there are two important components of the refuge for me. I visited often in the 70s and 80s when it was rated one of the top ten birding destinations in the country. There was a lot more water then. The lake was bigger, there was more vegetation, and we would see an amazing number of birds – more than you and I ever saw when you were growing

up. [In the 70s and 80s] I would go in May and sometimes as late June, and the "Narrows" – the area where the lakes meet the highway – was full of water and birds. It was a different experience than it is now – or at least that's how I remember it.

Although the numbers of birds has reduced, there are still enough migratory pathways for my ashes to go north, south, east, and west. Birds there go as far north as Alaska and the Canadian Tundra. I think it's the best place for me. I didn't always have Malheur in mind as the location, but I did have the concept that I wanted to see the world with my ashes and experience new things as a different form.

I also love the horizon out there. It's so expansive. A person feels part of nature, but also humbled by its scale. I like that – I don't think people should take themselves as seriously as we do [laughs]. And nature has a way of reducing one's sense of importance; and you realize that we're not as independent from it as we often think.

It's also special to me because of our family. Part of my central ethos for myself has been focusing on being a good father. So Malheur represents that as well as my interest in birds, biology, and the natural world. I guess it has become a symbolic construct of what's important to me.

E: I was recently thinking of my time there last summer. And I realized that while I went to learn more about the regional land-use politics and history, it was also more simple than that. It was a desire or maybe an instinct to return to a landscape that I miss.

M: That's one reason I wanted to move back to Idaho from Seattle. After your mom's sister died, we were sitting in bed talking about her, what we would want – where we'd want to be buried, etc. And I realized that I didn't want to be buried in Seattle. I suddenly thought if I don't want to be dead here, then why am I living here? There were many other reasons too, but I remember that very distinctly.

I think your mom and I have tried to have an open discussion about death and what we want for ourselves. We want to be as independent as possible and don't want to burden each other. As we get older, it will be nice to have some family around – not necessarily children, but also brothers and sisters and people who can give us some support. There will be an inevitable loss of independence due to changes in vision, hearing, mobility, unforeseen injuries and illnesses.

E: I imagine it can feel really lonely too. Your pace changes while everybody else is at a rapid pace that just gets faster and faster.

M: Yes. One thing I've thought about in relationship to this discussion is how much smarter it is to have a multi-generational family living together.

E: How do you think you would do living with your parents?

M: If we were in a different house situation [more accommodating to their mobility], we would have offered to have them stay here. But my parents always wanted to maintain their independence. I think that's the most frustrating thing for my mom and dad. They're in their [new] house, and even though it's

small and one level, it's still too complicated for them in their present health.

There was a discussion eight years ago when they moved that maybe they should move into a place like an assisted living with a residence that they buy. And they could transition there more easily as things change. I think they were against that because there were no places available in Caldwell. They didn't want to move to Boise or Meridian. I don't think my mom and dad were prepared for the rapidity with which their current situation developed – how fast their health declined.

E: Can you talk about what it's been like to take care of your parents? How it's similar or different from your expectations? Did you anticipate that you would play this role?

M: I think the most difficult thing has been the speed with which my dad has declined. His anxiety and depression have been really difficult: his lack of interest in almost everything and his rapid decline in terms of self-care. I guess I always figured that like the other members of his family, he would have a stroke or a heart attack and it would be over quickly. But

this constant, lingering decline and his social, physical, and mental withdrawal over the last four years has been really hard. It's difficult to have a conversation of substance with him. Often times he doesn't want to talk, so he just says, "I can't remember."

For the past few years, it really feels like there's no relationship other than caretaking. It feels largely like it's based on past memories and past relationships rather than an ongoing or growing relationship. So I'm just trying to support them and detach myself emotionally from some of the daily frustration – to try to care for them while realizing that there are a lot of things that we can't change.

But I would like to have a little more planning for my mom rather than waiting for a crisis to develop. She's starting to realize in small ways that she can't stay in their house much longer. She's realizing that her ability to be somewhat "independent" is only because we go over there all the time. She can't go to the store, she can't drive, it's hard for her to walk, hard for her to do laundry – and even though I imagined her aging, I never fully pictured someone as strong as her having trouble with

these basic things. It's sad in the sense that you realize how fragile we are or can become.

E: Did you get a sense of when you were younger that your dad struggled with anxiety or depression?

M: He worried a lot. He was always very fastidious and wanted things done in a certain way – wanted an appearance that things were clean, orderly, and nice. Probably because growing up they didn't have much – they lived in a remote mining town without indoor plumbing. So I think the attainment of a certain standard of living and maintaining an appearance was important to him.

To be honest, I don't think he ever recovered psychology from the fact that they had to move from their old house. He loved that place on Dearborn. They lived there for about 50 years, and he spent a lot of time and energy tinkering and working on the house. I think part of his depression comes from that – from losing a sense of purpose and feeling somewhat displaced in a nursing home. He feels that this really isn't his home and what was once his home isn't anymore. But my mom

couldn't get up and down the stairs. It was difficult for them to do much of anything in that old house. It wasn't a decision precipitated by crisis, but they worried they couldn't avoid one if they stayed. My dad hasn't really recovered from it.

E: Has helping your parents influenced what you want as you age? Or how you're thinking about your future?

M: I think I have a little more clarity than your mother does. I'd like to be somewhere close to family; maybe Spokane near her family. But she thinks being there with everyone can be toxic sometimes – though I'm just thinking in terms of friendship and support. I want to make sure that things are planned, and I hope that I will listen to you and your siblings if you're worried or concerned about us. After helping my dad, I hope I will be more accepting and able to admit when I need help or change.

Even after taking care of them, I still can't have as honest of a conversation about death with my parents as I would like. I try with my mom and she eventually comes around; but she's very resistant to help.

The way she was raised, there was nothing that you couldn't overcome with just sheer determination – every problem is a nail, and you just increase the force of your blows. So maybe she's coming to terms with the fact that that's not how everything works and that she can't fix grandpa's situation.

If I'm terminally ill or chronicall suffering, I would want the right to choose death with dignity – if I didn't want to eat, drink, or take more medication I want to listen to that and accept it and recognize when it's time and let nature take care of it. I think biological processes are just more powerful than anything else.

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