

Ashby Dialogue Report

The Universe Story and the University: Education for Justice and Sacred Earth 2017-2018

This year-long Ashby Dialogue aimed to bring students, staff, faculty, and community members together to explore an Earth-based pedagogy in the backdrop of exacerbating environmental destruction. The dialogue was first inspired by the work of world-renowned Earth scholar (and Greensboro native) Thomas Berry who argued that we need to shift from an anthropocentric story of the universe where humans are the primary reality to a *story of the universe* - one that takes into account the well-being of the entire Earth community in which humans are a *dimension*. To make the shift in consciousness, we need to both explore humans' inextricable relationship to the world beyond humans and change our current exploitative practices to one based on respect and care. How are we, humans, interdependent and interconnected with the beyond-human world? What does it mean to see ourselves as a dimension of the Earth? We held monthly events to engage these questions.

Faculty from six departments participated in planning *The Universe Story and the University* and took lead in facilitating events according to their expertise. The faculty included:

Etsuko Kinefuchi (Communication) – Faculty Coordinator
Aaron Allen (Environmental/Sustainability Studies)
Greg O'Brien (History)
Sarah Dorsey (University Libraries)
David McDuffie (Religious Studies)
Ann Somers (Biology)

Student participants were recruited from the following courses:

CST200: Communication and Community (Kinefuchi) – Fall 2017 & Spring 2018
CST337: Intercultural Communication (Kinefuchi) – Fall 2017
ENV400: Capstone Seminar in Environmental & Sustainability Studies -- Fall 2017 and Spring 2018
ENV110: Intro to Sustainability Studies -- Fall and Spring
HIS323: American Indian and Nature (O'Brien) – Spring 2018
MUS135: Intro to Music and Culture -- (Dorsey) Fall and Spring
REL250: Religious Traditions and Care of the Earth (McDuffie)

EVENTS IN FALL 2017

September 2017: Sustainability and a Sound Ecology (facilitated by Aaron Allen)

To kick off the series, we invited Dr. Jeff Titon, emeritus professor of ethnomusicology at Brown University, to speak about one of the most ancient connections humans have with the rest of the biosphere – sounds. This event took place on September 7, 3:30-5:30p.m., Virginia Dare Room, Alumni House. Dr. Titon's talk walked us through many ways by which sound connects humans with non-humans and how sound intimately connects to sustainability. He argued that sustainability is as much a problem of ethics and epistemology as it is of science and engineering; "a sound connection offers an opportunity to think through a sound epistemology that may lead to sound economies, sustainable communities, and a sound ecology that foregrounds the interdependence of all beings." The event was attended by about 60 participants.

October 2017: Journey of the Universe (Moderated by Ann Somers)

To continue the exploration of the ancient connections between humans and the rest of the Earth and ground it in a larger, evolutionary history, we watched *Journey of the Universe* (2013). We gathered on October 19 at 3:00-5:00p.m. in Sullivan Science Building, Room 101. The film was created based on the work of Thomas Berry and evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme. The film's co-executive producer, Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, from Yale University was our guest speaker and facilitator. She gave the context of the film and her work with the late Thomas Berry. The film took the viewers on the journey from the birth of stars and the Earth to the emergence of life and all the way to the contemporary environmental crises. The story of the universe was told to (re)member humans as an integral part of the story and place the contemporary environmental and social challenges in a larger context of the universe. After the film, Dr. Tucker took questions from the audience. Many questions came up, including how we move forward, how we may reconcile this story with faith-based origin stories, and how we may continue learning based what they learned through the film. This event was a great success. The audience almost filled the 300-seat lecture hall.

November 2017: American Indian sacred places (moderated by Greg O'Brien)

This month, we continued to consider humans' place in the universe story by examining American Indians' relationship to the land. In conjunction with the Native American Heritage month, we focused our attention on understanding American Indians' spiritual and cultural connections to place and what others can learn from such connections. We met on November, 14, 3:30-5:30p.m., in SOEB120. The event began with Dr. O'Brien's brief lecture on the sacred places across the United States, the reasons why these particular places became sacred for various Native American nations. The lecture was followed by a film that showed a case of struggle over a sacred place in Arizona. *Apache Stronghold*, a part of the RISE series, depicted the San Carlos Apache's fight against U.S. government's transfer of their sacred land to Rio Tinto, a multinational mining company. The film was followed by a Q&A facilitated by Dr. O'Brien, which demonstrated that the audience found the film and lecture very informative. The event was attended by about 80 people, most of whom students. Students in the audience stated that they did not know that there were so many sacred places are in the county and how American Indians have had to fight to protect them. The audience wanted to know what they could do to help with the fight. With this event, we began to address the ways environmental justice intersects with the protection of nature of which we are an intricate part.

February 2018: Environmental justice and advocacy

Continuing the focus on environmental justice, our Ashby Dialogue co-sponsored a talk by Diamond Holloman, a doctoral student in Curriculum for the Environment and Ecology at Chapel Hill) will kick off African American and African Diaspora Studies' annual Conference on African-American and African Diasporic Culture and Experience. She spoke about urban community gardens as spaces of reclaiming community agency in her presentation titled, "More Than a Garden: Urban Community Gardens as Spaces of Reclamation." The talk was on February 20, 3:30-5: 00 p.m. in Ferguson Building, Room 100. It was attended by about 50 people.

March 2018: Recovering agrarian roots and agrarian ethics (moderated by David McDuffie)

Agrarianism is central to the universe story and reintegration of humans into the biosphere. We

invited Dr. Norman Wirzba, research professor of theology, ecology, and rural life at Duke Divinity School to speak on this topic on March 1, 3:30-5:30p.m. (SOEB120). Dr. Wirzba gave a lecture titled his lecture as “The Difference Agrarianism Makes: Encountering The World As Gift.” He spoke about the importance of approaching the food nature offers us as a gift, for it changes our perspective of and interaction with it. This view, according to him, is only cultivated when we have a caring relationship with it; not only do you need to know where it came from but it has to be local. The globalized food system based on industrial agriculture and farming deprives us of this relationship. Dr. Wirzba interacted with the audience the whole time without notes or slides. Some students in the audience wrote to us that it was the best lecture they ever attended and helped them to change their perspective. The event drew about 60-70 participants.

April 2018: Climate justice for the universe story (moderated by Etsuko Kinefuchi and Sarah Dorsey)

In conjunction with the Earth Day, we concluded our Ashby Dialogue with a “teach-in” event on climate justice on April 19, 4:00-6:30p.m. at UNCG Greensboro Project Space in downtown Greensboro. The event featured two guests. Justin Catanoso, professor of Journalism at Wake Forest University, who has covered climate change over 30 years and a regular correspondent for MongaBay.com, a leading environmental news site online with an international following. He spoke about the significance of the Paris Climate Accords and growing number of municipal leaders across the county that have pledged to adopt renewable energy to mitigate climate change. Another speaker was Gayle Tuch, lawyer and the board chair of NC Climate Solutions Coalition. Gayle gave an overview of the major causes of climate change and discussed a couple of different plans for going fossil-free that are already underway in the United States. Also in attendance was a local chapter of Citizen’s Climate Lobby, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for the Congress to pass the use of carbon fee and dividend as a solution for climate change mitigation. Due to the timing of the event and the off-campus location, the attendance was small (about 25 people). However, we had a great discussion as a group and discussed ways for each of us to participate in the effort to address climate change.

Overall, I believe *The Universe Story and the University* was a great success. Each event focused on a different topic, but they all directly or indirectly grappled with the overarching questions: How are we, humans, interdependent and interconnected with the beyond-human world? What does it mean to see ourselves as a dimension of the Earth? Growing up in the highly industrialized, globalized world, we are taught to see the meaning of life only from an anthropocentric perspective, and higher education has played a significant role in this teaching. But universities must be a space where we learn how to respect life – all forms of life - and the common home we share. I believe this Ashby Dialogue served as such a pedagogical space in some small way.