



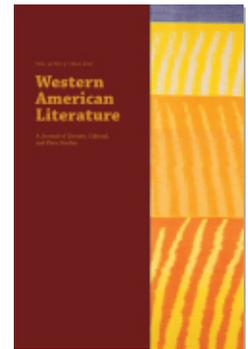
PROJECT MUSE®

"The Universe is Imaginative": An Interview with David
Robertson

Helena Feder

Western American Literature, Volume 52, Number 3, Fall 2017, pp. 243-266
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2017.0048>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/678642>

“The Universe is Imaginative”

An Interview with David Robertson

HELENA FEDER



Fig. 1. David Robertson at University of California’s Stebbins Cold Canyon Reserve. © 2015 Helena Feder.

I recently had the good fortune to sit down with David Robertson and discuss his work as an artist, scholar, and one of the first to teach literature with an emphasis on bioregion, and the enduring questions and complexities of nature-culture.

Robertson earned PhDs from the University of California at Irvine (English, 1972) and Yale University (Biblical Studies, 1966). He

joined the faculty of the University of California at Davis in 1971 and served as Department Chair from 2003–06. Robertson has published several books of images and text (*Black Holes*, Bypass Press, 1980; *Real Matter*, University of Utah Press, 1997; *Narrow Way to Nearby*, Boise State Press, 2000) and numerous articles, some creative, others a hybrid of scholarly and creative work. Robertson has participated in many two-person and group exhibitions, and thus far has had over a dozen solo exhibits at various galleries, including the Ansel Adams Gallery at Yosemite National Park, the ARC Gallery in Chicago, the Galleria at the University of California at Berkeley, the Carnegie Arts Center in Turlock, the Nathan Cummings Art Building at Stanford University, the Adell McMillan Art Gallery at the University of Oregon, the German-American Institute in Tübingen, Germany, and a retrospective exhibit at the John Natsoulas Gallery in Davis. His photographs have also appeared on the cover of a number of books, including Gary Snyder's *Practice of the Wild* and *The Gary Snyder Reader*, and he has been awarded Artist-in-Residence at Yosemite National Park four times between 1990 and 2014, and once at the Center for Land Use Interpretation, in Wendover, Utah.

David's work as an artist and a professor, his being human in the universe, has had a profound, inestimable impact on his audience, students, and colleagues. In April of 1988, Robertson and Ted Hullar, then Chancellor of the University of California at Davis, drove up to Gary Snyder's place in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Kitkitdizze, to meet with a group of humanists from Davis (Marijane Osborn, Will Baker, Michael Smith, Scott McLean, Robert Torrance, and Manfred Kusch) at the Ring of Bone Zendo on Snyder's property to discuss their common interest in the relationships between the natural and human. The result was the groundbreaking Program in Nature and Culture, the very first of its kind.

David told me, "We did not particularly like the name, for it expressed the very dualism we opposed. But Snyder said, 'Well, Nature and Culture is everything, so this is a major about *Everything*.' And so the name stuck." Various scientists ended up playing a significant role in the formation of the program, including Lenora Timm (Linguistics), Mark Wheelis (Microbiology), Peter Moyle (Wildlife



Fig. 2. Nature and Culture Program founders' gathering at Ring of Bone Zendo. Left to right: Ted Hullar, Michael Smith, Marijane Osborn, Scott McLean, Will Baker, Gary Snyder, Masa Uehara, Robert Torrance, Manfred Kusch. © 1988 David Robertson.

Biology), and Eldridge Moores (Geology). The program was incredibly successful; as David put it, “the Program in Nature and Culture was the product of a time, a place, and a group of people. Over time Davis changed; the times themselves changed. People left, but the students of the Program in Nature and Culture carried a sense of the ‘Everything’ with them.”

FEDER: You taught Thoreau for roughly thirty years. Do you have a favorite passage?

ROBERTSON: I like his account of climbing Mount Katahdin, and the “Contact! Contact!” passage. He’s wandering around and then, all of a sudden, something happens. He’s made contact with the mountain, with himself maybe. I don’t think he quite understands it, which is probably true of all experiences of that sort, mystical or otherwise. What I find most interesting is he immediately realizes that it’s a body-to-body contact: his body with the body of the mountain.

FEDER: That seems different from his transcendental moments in, say, *Walden*.

ROBERTSON: Well, what's he making contact with there? Maybe that is transcendental too, but in "Contact! Contact!" he doesn't go off into the ether, or into a transcendental type of mystical experience. He talks about his body, about real, solid stuff. Mountains have a presence that's just there.

FEDER: For many years you taught a class centered on mountains. It started with Moses. What did you teach between Moses and Sinai and Thoreau and Katahdin?

ROBERTSON: The course was "Literature of Wilderness." We started with wilderness on the Sinai Peninsula. I had them read *Exodus*. The main point was this: Moses goes up this mountain in the wilderness, and what does he come down with? Laws. Laws that have to do with how humans should behave toward one another and toward God. He goes up the mountain and comes down with an understanding of how humans should deal with one another. That sets the tone of the class. What is it you learn when you go out into wilderness? Isn't it interesting? He doesn't learn about botany or zoology or geology or ecology.

FEDER: Human cultures are products of the wilderness.

ROBERTSON: Then the class reads Petrarch's "Ascent of Mont Ventoux." It is interesting that he's immediately drawn to earthly beauty, and then says, "I should pay attention to God and not earthly things." Petrarch loves what he sees but feels guilty about it. Next we read Wordsworth's "Ascent of Snowdon" in *The Prelude*. On Mount Snowdon, Wordsworth learns how imaginative the universe is. It almost seems too bad that Wordsworth's work preceded Charles Darwin's, because Darwin might have given him a mechanism for the imaginative production of (and by) the universe.

FEDER: When you say “imaginative” do you mean that the universe is an intelligent agent or a force that is creative?

ROBERTSON: Well I wouldn't say that the universe is intelligent in a straightforward way, but I think the universe is imaginative. And it throws up beings that are imaginative. People say: “The universe produces galaxies.” So this is what the universe does: it produces galaxies. That's what happens when forces act upon matter/energy. Well, here we humans are; the universe has also produced us. If you can understand the nature of the universe by looking at galaxies, you must also consider the idea that you can understand the universe by looking at us. If the universe is starry it's because it's got all these stars in it, then it is also intelligent, at least in part because we are here.

FEDER: But we are not the pinnacle or purpose of the universe.

ROBERTSON: I would never get on Teilhard de Chardin's wavelength. I don't see any great evidence for some sort of drive toward an end product. The universe isn't teleological. For example, if one looks at the history of art made by humans, you will not, I think, succeed in demonstrating that art improves. The first art you have—maybe cave paintings of thirty thousand years ago—is as good as anything that's ever been done. So art does not progress.

FEDER: And yet there's constant pressure for formal innovation.

ROBERTSON: Yes, well there's this drive, at least in the last few centuries in Western culture, to produce something new, but it's not better. I think if you were to ask obvious innovators, like the Cubists or Abstract Expressionists, about improvement I don't think any would say, “My art is better than Michelangelo's.” It's just different. It seems to me the universe is imaginative in the same way. It's not going someplace. There is no pull to get better and better, or more and more intellectual, or more and more spiritual.

FEDER: Can I play devil's advocate just a little? Yes, perhaps Picasso wouldn't say, "My 'Blue Period' is better than Michelangelo's *David*," fair enough, but current artists concerned with similar formal problems could be described as derivative. I don't think formal innovation, a part of what makes art Art, is just a matter of difference. Even though it isn't teleological, it's not just difference without distinction. New art somehow adds to or exceeds the current landscape of thought or aesthetic experience, and that addition seems "better."

ROBERTSON: I'm much more cynical about this. The reason why you need to innovate and establish your own style is you need to make money. People are not going to buy your work if you carve a *David*.

FEDER: True, although very few artists actually produce art to make money. Maybe the art world itself is deeply cynical, even if artists aren't. I have always wanted to ask you, why photography, as opposed to another medium? You were already an accomplished literary scholar when you shifted emphasis. Why shift at all?

ROBERTSON: Well, I don't know if I have a very good answer to that, but here's my own sense of my career.

I started out, in graduate school and the years immediately following, thinking of myself as a scholar. Although, even then, if you had asked me, I would have said, "I'm primarily a teacher, and secondarily a scholar." But it became clear to me, over the years, that I cannot keep on track enough to keep up with scholarship. I'm too all over the place.

I started doing things that interested me but never required much research. Projects that required me to read and conduct interviews, with only a little library research. For example, I wrote a book that has an interview with Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen on the circumambulation of Mount Tamalpais. But I didn't try to become an authority on *pradakshina*¹ in Buddhism. Nor did I try to write about everyone who's circumambulated Mt. Tam, much less the other mountains of the world, such as Mount Kailash. But this type of writing did mean that I had to get out there on the mountain.

During the summer after eleventh grade, my parents and another family went on a long tour through Michigan and the Great Lakes, across Canada, and came down through Boston, New York, and Washington. I had an Argus C3 camera, no light meter. I remember Washington specifically. Somewhat to the irritation of the other family, instead of just taking a picture where I was standing, I spent time moving around so that the elements in the picture fit together. I realize, looking back on it, that I am an “eye person.” I respond to the visual world by making compositions of it. I’m absolutely terrible as a draftsman; I cannot draw. I think photography was an art form that I was well suited to because the camera does some of the work of reproducing the image for me.

FEDER: Most of your work combines image and text; is there an inherent relationship between your visual and textual composition?

ROBERTSON: Yes. So if somebody asks me, “What genre do you work in?” I answer, “I combine photographs and text.” Sean O’Grady, when he was editor of *The Western Writers Series* at Boise State, asked me to write a pamphlet on books that combine texts and photographs. Some of my general theories are in that book. Up until I wrote *West of Eden: History of the Art and Literature of Yosemite*, I tried to write like a scholar, to be laboriously clear. That book loosened me up; I started to write like I wanted to write. And I realized, “Well, I can do a reasonably good job at this!”

FEDER: How old were you at that time?

ROBERTSON: Well, that was in 1979, so I was forty-two.

FEDER: Let’s go back to the eye of visual composition and the “I” of textual composition. You have adopted various personas, such as Ecotourist, Ecohuman or even the Universe. It might help to answer the question “Why photography?” to keep questioning the relation between text and image. How do the images and the text interact? How are the processes of composition the same and different?

ROBERTSON: [Chuckles]. Well this is a really hard one for me to answer because I don't know that I understand it very well. Let's take one step back. If you were to ask people who get books, postcards, and the like from me, what they make of it, the most frequent response would be, "I don't know." I was at a potluck just yesterday and someone said to me, "We get postcards from you all the time." And my friend Rob added, "Yes, and we don't know what to make of them."

I sent *Dodecahedron* to an old professor I had in seminary. He said, "The text here is pretty interesting, but I haven't a clue what the photographs have to do with the text." It makes sense to me, but it may not make sense to virtually anyone else.

FEDER: How does it make sense to *you*?

ROBERTSON: All right, so this is back to the start of this conversation about the universe as imaginative. Plato—this is fundamental to how I understand myself and what I'm doing—Plato believed that certain solid shapes could be identified with elements of the universe: water, earth, air, fire. But there are five basic solids. The fifth? The dodecahedron: the universe itself. I wrote back to my former professor and told him this: from Plato's point of view the world is constituted of twelve planes, and each plane has five facets to it. So I produced a book that has twelve sets of photographs; each set has five photographs. Look at all of them together, and you are looking at the universe.

FEDER: And what will you see?

ROBERTSON: You will see that the universe is imaginative.

FEDER: Could you see this in architecture or in oils?

ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I mean, what is the Sistine Chapel, but a picture of the universe?

FEDER: Some might say it's a picture of God as man or man as God.

ROBERTSON: Well, but this is always the case. We can't get out of being human, so any of our pictures of the universe are going to be pictures that humans make of the universe.

FEDER: But there's a big difference between anthropocentrism as a necessary condition of thought, as epistemologically inevitable, and anthropocentric solipsism—a slippery slope to hell. Is the Sistine Chapel an image of the universe reflected in or through the human—a microcosm of the macrocosm? Or an image of anthropocentric solipsism? Or is there a continuum between the two?

ROBERTSON: It's on a continuum. But we're back to Thoreau: "Contact! Contact!" That's when he went from solipsism to connection, to something that's out there and beyond him—and he's making the connection as a human. He can't jump out of being human, but there's a connection being made with something that's not him.

FEDER: *I agree.* And yet there are ways of reading these texts or looking at these images that seem to suggest the opposite. Alongside its materialism, *Walden* has moments of transcendentalism that feel solipsistic.

ROBERTSON: I'm sure that's the case with Michelangelo too. Artists are always talking about the difference between great art and not-so-great art. Great art's never *truly* solipsistic. It has to tell people something they feel is true about the world around them.

FEDER: Logically, solipsism would seem to preclude the rest of the world. Could one argue beyond logic, as art is beyond logic, that some art (perhaps great art) contains or conveys the tension between, for lack of a better word, transcendental and materialist impulses? Or, one solipsistic and one in which the self almost disappears in the universe?

ROBERTSON: Yes. I think of myself as a believer in Aristotle's mimesis. Art imitates nature, so when people ask me, "What do you mean by this?" My answer is, "All right, your model is 'I know what



Fig. 3. Highway 50, Utah Nevada Border. © 2015 David Robertson.

I want to say. I'm encoding it in this book obliquely so that you have to work to find out what I mean." That's not the model I'm working on. The model I'm working on is: if there's anything "encoded" in the text . . .

FEDER: It's already in nature itself.

ROBERTSON: Exactly. Nature is complex, complicated, confusing, and any art that simply solves those problems is not great art. Is this making any sense?

FEDER: Oh yes. You know, I love the books and the postcards. And sometimes I know why, and sometimes I don't.

ROBERTSON: But that's true with me too.

FEDER: One of my recent favorites is a picture you took of a camera on a pole over a cliff. It isn't just because it is self-referential; all



Fig. 4. Fort Churchill State Historic Park, Nevada. © 2015 David Robertson

of your images call attention to themselves as images right away. They're not transparent on the world. You play with angle and color and overlay; you play with texture and shadow. There was a person leaning on the pole as well.

ROBERTSON: Chris Edmands. We met him at Taft Point by coincidence. [My wife] Jeannette and I go on a trip. We get out in a place here or there, and I look around and walk around, and I can spot what I'm interested in. Jeannette can spot it too. There's clearly some kind of pattern here, but at the same time I can't predict it ahead of time. I just know it when it happens. I know when I'm going to pull out the camera.

I just took a picture of the Utah Nevada border, looking down the highway toward Nevada but standing in Utah. There's a cloud in the sky, and I say, "This is it. That photograph will be on a card or in a book." I hadn't even gotten the camera out yet. There are other times when I think, "Oh Lord this is interesting!" and I will start

to play with it after downloading it in Photoshop and it will go nowhere, and then into Apple's garbage can.

So when I sit down and play with the photograph in Photoshop, it's very much like walking around outside. I bring up the photograph I've taken and I start to manipulate it in various ways—sometimes at random.

FEDER: Does this happen with text too?

ROBERTSON: Yes, all the time with text. But the way I work with text is very different from the way I work with photographs. The words come to me, while I'm there, one or two hours later, or a day later.

FEDER: Do they explicate, oppose, or enhance the image? Do the words ever have the same relation to the photo or is it different every time?

ROBERTSON: Sometimes it's easier to talk about what you reject than it is to talk about what you accept. Here are things that I reject: If I look at a photograph that I've just taken, or worked with, and say, "Oh! I understand what's going on here," out it goes. With one exception, I never consciously publish that kind of photograph.

FEDER: Are you thinking, by any chance, of the Valentine image of the leaping heart? I'm just curious.

ROBERTSON: [Laughs]. Yeah!

Back to mimesis, if I understand immediately what the photograph is saying then the photograph is not complicated or mimetic enough, because the world doesn't say anything that clearly. Or not much that matters.

So here's another mantra: I want pieces in which the photographs do not illustrate the text, and the text does not explain the photographs. If I'm successful then the text will not explain the photograph, and the photograph will not illustrate the text. There's

going to be tension between them, and you have to play with how they're related to each other.

I think the balance between image and text has changed over the last thirty years. Thirty years ago the text carried more weight than the photograph. There is a period in which they are about equally weighted, and now the images have become more weighty. One of the reasons for that is that I find writing somewhere between ten and a hundred times more difficult than working with photographs. Writing is the difficult part. It's laborious; I agonize over it; I come up with solutions in my sleep. It takes so long, in part because I'm interested in rhythm (and I've talked with Gary Snyder about this); the single most important thing in the text to me is rhythm. So I will manipulate the texts until it sounds right—over and above everything else.

FEDER: That intrigues me because I've been thinking about the way you use color in your photographs. So much attention is called to color, and not just because you sometimes use hyper or very saturated colors (as filters or overlays?). The colors seem to convey rhythm, like music.

ROBERTSON: I think that's right on.

If you had all the drafts, first draft, second draft, third draft, fourth draft, you'd find that the texts get shorter and shorter and they get slightly more oblique, and they sound better when you read them out loud. Let's say you have a postcard with writing on one side and an image on the other. You look at the photograph and your eye dances around. And then you turn it over, read it, and your mind dances around. That would please me.

FEDER: Then I think you should be very pleased. [Robertson laughs]. You went from being a scholar of text and image to an artist of image and text. Did it feel like a natural transition for you? I ask because this whole time you've been interested in the same subject matter—the natural world and the way we come to understand it, which, in the West, often means science. I'm curious about how science fits in with all of this.

ROBERTSON: Well I think scientists are basically up to the same thing artists are up to. Scientists, though, can fool themselves more easily than artists into thinking they've really got to something definitive.

The big question here is, "Is the universe parsable by human beings?" And the jury is still out. I'll be willing to bet you that the jury is never going to be in.

FEDER: Now when you say "parsable," it calls to mind your photographs and texts. It also calls to mind the search for exotic, theorized particles, which is also the search for evidence of the theory of everything (TOE). Are you thinking of the TOE when you say parsable?

ROBERTSON: Well, could one write a series of mathematical equations that would be a theory of everything—that would tell you how everything works? Is the universe, all of life and ourselves, expressible in mathematical formulas? Science is dedicated to the proposition that you can go a very long way to that end.

FEDER: Have you seen *Particle Fever*, the documentary about the Large Hadron Collider, Higgs boson, and the hope for super symmetry (the hope that the universe is potentially knowable)? What would it mean if the universe were knowable?

ROBERTSON: The universe is somewhat knowable, but, if the universe were completely knowable, I'm not sure that art would have a place in it anymore.

You want the process to actually get you somewhere. Scientists also want to find something out that they don't already know. I think art wants to explore the inner life, the outer life, and the connections between the two that we don't completely understand.

FEDER: What do you know now that you didn't know before?

ROBERTSON: Well I think that the universe is imaginative [Laughs]. In terms of getting somewhere, I would say the universe is imagi-

native; the universe is extremely complicated; we are imaginative; we are extremely complicated. The universe probably can't be figured out. I think it's beyond any question whatsoever that we can't be figured out. I feel extremely confident nobody is ever going to do that. That doesn't mean that we don't know anything about the universe and ourselves; it just means that we're not going to be able to put the whole composition in order.

FEDER: So one thing that we know about ourselves is that part of what we're made of is uncertainty. Materiality is mysterious.

ROBERTSON: I shy away from certain terms; one of them is mystery. In our culture, the word is too easily misunderstood. People think it means some kind of spirit, or essence. That's not what I think.

One of our jobs as human beings is to live with complication and uncertainty. There's uncertainty, not just at the level of quantum mechanics, but throughout all of life. One of the signs that we are doing a reasonably good job as human beings is if we can admit uncertainty, and find ways of acting that will take it into consideration and not give up, not collapse, or retreat. We sometimes latch on to simplistic notions of the universe, and then try to apply that simplistic, limited idea to the whole thing. And we lose all that complexity.

FEDER: We have to choose which information to pay attention to; we're tiny little permeable systems. I think that some people have a greater tolerance for systemic stress—call it ambiguity, ambivalence, and complexity—than others.

Back to your art. For some people, it is so ambiguous that it really stretches them. Is that part of what you're trying to do? Does being a good human in the universe mean creating a greater space within yourself for the ambiguity and complexity inherent in the universe?

ROBERTSON: That's nicely put! I would certainly like to think so. [Laughs.]

FEDER: May I circle back through pedagogy? We went from Moses to Petrarch and Wordsworth. Who comes after Wordsworth in the literature of wilderness course?

ROBERTSON: Faulkner. “The Bear” leads into the problematic ways in which Americans have dealt with wilderness. The bear represents an existence that we would like to have, and we kill it. But the whole process of killing is also what makes Ike into an interesting human being. “The Bear” seems, to me, to be a very American story because we’re killing the wilderness, as we love it. The bear must represent an existence that’s beyond us, that’s powerful; we can’t understand it, but we would like to have it.

And we kill it; we make an elaborate ritual out of killing it. Why?

FEDER: Is it a way to consume it? A perverse way of “becoming” bear?

ROBERTSON: There’s the question. Now we’re back to something essential in our culture: the Christian model, which goes back forty thousand years at least. The model is if you kill something, and you consume it, you become part of it and it becomes part of you.

We’re getting close now to how humans try to come to terms with a universe that is very powerful but that they don’t fully understand and are somewhat afraid of. The bear represents this. I set that up, then move on to other possible relationships with wilderness, ones that enrich it and us. I use Mary Austin and Gary Snyder as two models. Then we end the class with *Ceremony*, bringing us back to ritual.

FEDER: The practice of awareness?

ROBERTSON: Right. I think the great thing about Buddhism is that, at its center, it is a practice, and the practice is itself the end that the religion envisions for you (enlightenment, whatever that is). It’s a series of rituals. If you do them, they will get you to a place where you may understand what the universe is—as good an understanding as you’ll get as a human—and your place in it. In Chris-

tianity, a psychic spiritual event happens inside of you, but how do you behave after the event?

I see the same thing going on in science. Max Planck said sciences progress one funeral at a time. Back when I was in college, Hoyle's Steady State Theory and the Big Bang Theory were running neck and neck. The Big Bang Theory won the day. You're constantly pushing in science, constantly trying to figure out what you don't know. That means somebody comes up with a theory and you immediately start to test it. Art is different in the sense that nobody has improved on Michelangelo. As far as I can tell, no one has ever improved on any artist.

FEDER: So, science is (traditionally) event or result-driven, and art is a practice.

ROBERTSON: It's not like an artist starts to work and says, "Okay, now I want to test Michelangelo's understanding of the universe and how he's embodied it in art, and I want to see if it holds." Method in science is different from the method of artists, at least in this respect.

FEDER: But, at their best, scientists seem to embody both ends of the horseshoe. That is, there's an intuitive, creative process through which they come up with questions, and a second, more mechanical process, in which they parse and test. But let's get back to the distinction between the artist and the scholar/critic (I'll lump the latter together for the purpose of argument). As an artist, you create images and text people find ambiguous. Then there's a whole industry of people who have things to say about it—to explicate it or to create criteria for it. Because you started off as a scholar, and produced works of literary criticism, how do you see the relationship between those things: between David Robertson who got his PhD in English and produced works of literary criticism, and David Robertson who does everything possible to resist explication?

ROBERTSON: I think the answer to that is biographical. That is, that's the only one I can think of right now. I think that, maybe at

Yale, I got the idea that my abilities were such that I was not going to produce art; I was going to try to explain it, understand it, and communicate that understanding to the larger world. I found out that I wasn't terribly bad at it. I did get tenure at the University of California. But scholarship wasn't all that satisfying. The older I got, into my forties and fifties, it didn't sustain my interest and my imagination. So I turned to the camera.

I bought my first one in 1973 here in downtown Davis. I still keep up with the woman I bought it from. It seemed to me that the camera opened up a side of me that I had not paid much attention to, but really was the way I wanted to be in the world. If I were writing an autobiography, I would say the '90s was my swing decade, because up until the '90s I thought of myself mostly a scholar. In the '90s I became a scholar who works on imaginative projects, but I was basically still oriented toward other people's work. But I began illustrating that scholarship with my own creative photographs.

Sometime around '93, Tom Lyon was editor of *Western American Literature*. I submitted to him an article on Gary and Jack Kerouac on Mount Tamalpais with my creative photographs that meshed obliquely with the text. They did not illustrate the text, and the text didn't explain the photographs. He published it. That was very important for me. And then he published another one. Both of these pieces were in revised form in *Real Matter* in '97.

FEDER: By the time I met you in '99, you already had photographs hanging in a gallery in town. I remember you taking pictures when we did the circumambulation of Mt. Tam in '99 or 2000.

ROBERTSON: Lyon's publication of those articles in *Western American Literature* was innovative, and a nice affirmation from the scholarly side of things. They'd never published photographs before in that journal. That affirmation from the scholarly community actually pushed me in the direction of becoming an artist.

FEDER: You've been awarded several artist-in-residence positions at Yosemite.

ROBERTSON: Yes, four. They invite photographers, painters, sculptures, and the like. And so my little book, *Yosemite*, was based on the third residency. I don't think that was a very successful project. But the postcards I am doing now, you'll get number six when you get back home (there's going to be somewhere between eleven and thirteen of them altogether), are the result of the fourth residency.

FEDER: When do you know, with postcard projects, that you have a book?

ROBERTSON: Mostly because I've decided ahead of time that it is going to be a book. Almost all of my art is related to travel. Now and then I am criticized for that.

On the London trip I knew I was going to do a photo and word project, but I didn't know what kind. So we get into London and a week goes by, maybe two, and we're walking. Outside a tube station, a guy is giving away newspapers. On Thursday some paper produces a special edition to give away. It has a fluid design to it, doesn't look all that much like a newspaper. I look at it and say to Jeannette, "This is the form I'm going to use in the London project." In 2011, we went back to London for three months and I knew I wanted to produce another book. Before we left Davis I knew that the central theme would be "Walkabout." I think that's one of my better pieces. If you compare the 2005 London project with the 2011 London project, you will see that in the 2005 one the text is two thirds and the photographs one third. In the 2011 project the proportion is reversed. Many of the words in the second project are words in the images, not my words.

FEDER: When you're in cities there's a lot of shop windows, a lot of glass, a lot of reflective surfaces in your photographs, which I've always found very interesting. It's one of those little things that *seem* like a handhold, a literally/visually self-reflective moment.

ROBERTSON: Yes. One of the reasons for this is that, as I'm sure you've noticed, the universe is full of stuff. All right, so if you take what's inside of the store and you combine it with what's outside

of the store by having the outside reflected in the window you're looking through, you can get a lot of stuff in the photograph. That's the basic rationale for the reflective surfaces.

FEDER: On the other hand, when you're photographing "natural" landscapes (not urban or suburban), many of your images seem to have very little in them. Sometimes there is a person, and sometimes not. Often there's a human-made object somewhere in the image. They are not pastoral or sublime landscapes; they're not "beautiful." They seem empty, and sometimes the photographs seem like musings on emptiness.

ROBERTSON: Exactly! You're exactly right.

FEDER: I have a jar-in-Tennessee moment when I look at some of them.

ROBERTSON: Now let's go back to Buddhism. There're two basic strategies in Buddhism (I'm talking like I know what I'm talking about, but I don't really). One of those strategies is emptiness, that's Zen. And another basic strategy is fullness, and that's esoteric Buddhism. I like both of them.

Sometimes I tend toward emptiness. Get everything out of the picture you could possibly get out of it. I was in Japan and this friend of ours, Jeff Irish, knew what I was interested in, so he set up a meeting with a Tendai priest. This priest said, "Well, you know there're two ways in Buddhism. One way is emptiness, and another way is fullness. Tendai Buddhism opts for fullness, but you must understand that they arrive at the same place." I've taken that to heart. And so sometimes I'm interested in fullness and I cram everything I can get into a photograph. If you watch me photograph, and you watch carefully, you will see that I move the camera around and I move myself around to make sure certain things get in the photographs, or to make sure certain things get out of the photographs.

This leads into an interesting story with Gary. One time, fifteen years ago or so, I was at Gary's and we were having dinner. I was re-

counting my experience in Japan, and I said, “You know, I think if I were to become a Buddhist I wouldn’t be a Zen Buddhist. I’d join the Tendai or Shingon sect because I like this fullness that they’re after.” Gary pounced, “What?! Why would you do that? What do you mean by that?” And Kai [Gary’s son] was at the table and, to my eternal thankfulness, he rescued me. He jumps in and says, “Well I can see how he might do that. For one thing, you kind of pile a whole bunch of stuff in and it’s really interesting and complicated. And another thing is there’s more emphasis on ritual. Zen Buddhism pares down going toward emptiness, and Tendai elaborates it.” I’ve never been so thankful to be rescued. [Laughs.]

Anyway, the trip to Japan was very important and I learned a lot. I realized that I like fullness and I like emptiness. Sometimes I go for one, and sometimes I go for the other. I try never to get into a spot where I go only after one of them.

. . . So this leads into a question. If the neo-Darwinian explanation of how life on earth has evolved is true, why does any animal make art? How is art adaptive, or does it come along with something else that is adaptive?

FEDER: If I had to answer, I would say art probably is adaptive. This circles back to what you said about the ways in which art makes us more fully human, and more fully present in our environment. If we paid more attention to the art we make, it could benefit us as a species. The best art creates a space for difference, ambivalence, ambiguity, and complexity, which allows for a more nuanced relationship with the rest of the world.

ROBERTSON: That makes sense to me. A second question: how does one account for really abstract art, something like American Abstract Expressionism?

FEDER: As something that represents abstraction itself as a process. It is part of the nature of thinking that thought not only parses out what to pay attention to or what not to pay attention to, but also abstracts that into concepts, filters it through language. You could think of abstract art as, in part, a representation of the process of

abstraction. It's abstract because it forces you to engage with your own thought processes. Abstraction is part of our experience of being human, and part of what art does is reflect us back to ourselves.

Does being human have an inherent place in the universe? Abstract art can seem totally alien to the universe; *sometimes* it seems the point of such art. When you come across a sculpture that looks inorganic, it seems to say, "I'm not nature; I'm something else." We might also hear it say, "I am Other!" Abstract art may also be thought of as a profound engagement with otherness (as well as ourselves). Every day we encounter the radically other in nature. These others are related to us and radically different at the same time. So that's one way we could see radically abstract art as mimetic. It represents one way in which we engage with the world.

ROBERTSON: This is good! You should write that up. I was telling you about walking out on Highway 50 at the Utah Nevada border, and looking through the camera at the highway with a cloud above it. I had an emotional reaction mediated by the eye. I went over there to take the picture, not because I saw the cloud above the road but because I wanted to have a picture of the border. Because the pavement changes when you go from one state to the other. Utah has one surface, and Nevada has another surface. When I get there and hold the viewfinder up, I'm ecstatic.

FEDER: Why did you want a picture at the border? Because it's an ecotone?

ROBERTSON: Sure. It's an ecotone because on the Utah side there's a motel, and on the Nevada side there's a casino. I'm interested in borders because they're complicated, difficult to explain, problematic, emotionally unsettling. Borders are a good place to find what I'm looking for.

I've found three personas for myself (Ecotourist, Ecohuman, and "The Flaneur") but they all have one thing in common. Recently, I was reading a book about desert plants and I came to a page about broom. Broom is an invasive species from Europe. And I read, "Broom thrives on disturbed places." I thought, "Ah-ha! That's who

I am.” I thrive in places where nature is disturbing humans and humans are disturbing nature. There’s some way in which the place is in flux.

FEDER: What do you think of the argument that there are no “wild” spaces left anymore because human influence is everywhere?

ROBERTSON: What makes me nervous about this is humans are just as wild as any animal on earth. So if we say, “Wild animals are out there,” we aren’t recognizing that we are wild.

FEDER: True. But isn’t there a qualitative difference between humans and other megafauna? We’re the only ones, at the moment, who could ruin the planet for a large number of other creatures. Do you think the Anthropocene is a useful concept?

ROBERTSON: I think it’s overestimating human power by a long shot. Still, about sixty-five million years ago an asteroid hit the earth and wow did it change a lot of things. Well, humans come along and ruin the whole place in 2050, and in 10 million years it’s back again.

FEDER: Is time another ecotone?

ROBERTSON: Well, the sun will start to expand. There’s a limit, unless we go to other solar systems. . . . I think a lot of the problems human beings make for themselves stem from taking themselves too seriously. They take too seriously the damage they can do. And they take too seriously the good they can do. As a species, we are extraordinarily pleased with ourselves, don’t you think?

It took four-and-a-half billion years for us to get here. We’ve been around maybe forty thousand years as *Homo sapiens*, maybe eighty thousand, maybe longer. Who knows exactly how long, but not very long. Bacteria: now those people are to be admired. They have staying power. They have legitimate reason to be proud. Of course for Jeanette and me, for our family, I want good things for them. But the species as a whole, I don’t see that there’s all that

much wrapped up in the survival of the human species. There will be other species that will be just as interesting.

HELENA FEDER, PhD, is Associate Professor of Literature and Environment at East Carolina University, where she directs Great Books, a multidisciplinary critical humanities program. Feder has published a monograph, *Ecocriticism and the Idea of Culture*, now in paperback with Routledge, and essays in various venues, including *ISLE*, *Green Letters*, *Configurations*, *Women's Studies*, *North American Review*, and the *Journal of Ecocriticism*.

NOTE

1. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the rite of circumambulating in a clockwise direction an image, relic, shrine, or other sacred object. The worshiper, by beginning in the east and keeping the sacred object on his right-hand side, proceeds to the south, thus moving in the direction followed daily by the course of the sun. Pilgrimages sometimes consist of circumambulating an entire town, such as the sacred city of Varanasi (Benares), a 36-mile (58-km) journey, or the Ganges River from source to sea and back, a trip that when undertaken on foot requires several years. Explanations of the rite vary from the delineation of an area for a particular sacred purpose to an attempt to influence the course of events and produce good fortune by imitating the auspicious journey of the sun. Circumambulating in a counterclockwise movement—i.e., keeping the left shoulder toward the central object—called *prasavya*, is observed in funeral ceremonies (Pradakshina, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/pradakshina. Accessed 31 May, 2016).