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Peter Lutze
Boise State University

James Armstrong
Boise State University

Laura Woodworth-Ney
Idaho State University

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VideoPoetry: Collaboration as Imaginative Method

Peter Lutze, Boise State University, Idaho, USA
James Armstrong, Boise State University, Idaho, USA
Laura Woodworth-Ney, Idaho State University, Idaho, USA

Abstract: Three Idaho professors (a poet, videographer, and historian) have been collaborating for eight years on a cross-disciplinary project called VideoPoetry, which integrates historical narration, narrative poetry, historical photographs, and videography into the video medium. To this point we've worked primarily on a specific program, Culture of Reclamation, which explores the culture of the early irrigated landscape communities in southern Idaho. In reflecting on our work-process, we've discovered that we've fundamentally changed as scholars as a result of our collaboration. This paper identifies the nature of our changes and documents instances of the ways in which we have been challenged to expand our ideas about other academic disciplines and our own. To work within the constraints of VideoPoetry, a new mode of expression, each of us has had to modify our traditional methods. For example, the poet altered a poem's imagery to suit the sequence and duration of video images. Through the poet's exploration of the inner lives of historical figures, the historian learned how the imagination can take us beyond what historical sources are willing to tell. Culture of Reclamation is grounded in the transformation of the arid American West, which occurred about one hundred years ago. By focusing our work on the irrigation of southern Idaho, we have come to a greater understanding of the region where we work and live. The video medium allows us to share these insights as public history—the dissemination of scholarship and research to audiences outside of the academy. VideoPoetry compels us to envision collaboratively a narrative about our regional foundations. Through video, we are able to present to a broad audience the often overlooked but transformational power of irrigation projects to turn the arid West into a land of bounty.

Keywords: VideoPoetry, Video, Poetry, History, Videography, American West, Western United States, Irrigation, Evocative Representation, Women in the West

The Beginnings of Collaborative Scholarship

OUR COLLABORATION BEGAN as an imaginative exploration of two historical photographs, which Dr. Laura Woodworth-Ney presented in a panel in a presentation, "Fiction, History, and Interpretation: Whose Truth?" at BookFest 2002 in Boise, Idaho. Dr. Laura Woodworth-Ney presented information on the contribution of women writers, women authors and women's clubs to the culture of the irrigated settlement communities along the Snake and Boise rivers between 1870 and 1920. The wives of irrigation project managers, engineers, and entrepreneurs were often college-educated women who came from middle-class backgrounds. Coming to the arid West from the East or Midwest, they were used to the company of family and friends, established cultural events, a relatively humid climate, and the presence of trees. The sagebrush desert wilderness shocked their spirits and challenged their resourcefulness. Here they had to raise families without the customary conveniences and the support of an extended family.

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Writers such as Annie Pike Greenwood and Elizabeth Layton DeMary were university-educated and appreciated the arts. They viewed the arts and their definitions of culture as connections to the comforts of their pasts while they adjusted to life in an alien place. Illustrator and author Mary Hallock Foote attended the School for Design at the Cooper Institute in New York City, and in 1924 Idaho's governor appointed Irene Welch Grissom of Idaho Falls to be the state's first poet laureate. These women and other reclamation women had grown up in homes steeped in American and British culture. Women's clubs arose in Boise, Twin Falls, Payette, Rupert, and other irrigated settlements in Idaho in response to the need for mutual support and culture. Clubs also provided women a way to increase their participation in political, civic, and artistic activities. These clubs were also part of the international women's movement, which reflected a change from the Victorian Era to the Progressive Era. Just as large-scale irrigation projects transformed the desert into new agricultural lands, women's cultural activities helped these pioneer women transform the sagebrush wilderness into home.

In response to Woodworth-Ney's presentation, Dr. James Armstrong wrote two poems, "Culture Club, 1909" and "Acts of Reclamation." Armstrong and Dr. Peter Lutze had previously completed a VideoPoetry project, *Mountain Seasons*, which explored the relationship between nature and the imagination. The availability of historical photographs, the proximity of the reclamation area, and the appeal of cross-disciplinary work brought the three of us together on *Culture of Reclamation*. Whereas *Mountain Seasons* was a project with mostly aesthetic purposes, *Culture of Reclamation* attempts to balance aesthetic and informational purposes and is primarily a response to historical research.

VideoPoetry and Qualitative Research

Our first VideoPoem was "Culture Club, 1909" (see the appendix). The poem came to Armstrong in response to two photographs he'd seen in Woodworth-Ney's presentation. The first photograph shows a group of Victorian ladies in white dresses and hats seated for conversation in a garden in Rupert, Idaho (see Figure 1). The second photograph, by Charles Lilybridge, shows an unidentified young woman with a book seated above an irrigation canal (see Figure 2). Armstrong brought the women from these two photographs together in the poem. The poem explores what the young woman at the canal might have been thinking if she had been a member of The Culture Club, the group of women meeting in the garden.

Figure 1: The Rupert Culture Club [Untitled. Photographer Unknown].
DeMary Memorial Library, Rupert, Idaho. Used with Permission.

Figure 2: Woman beside Canal [Untitled. Charles Lilybridge, Photographer].
Colorado Historical Society, Photo CHS–L 2647. Used with Permission.

VideoPoems as Evocative Representations

To consider VideoPoetry in the context of qualitative research, we looked first to the writing of Laurel Richardson. "The Culture Club, 1909" has the essential qualities of what Richardson termed an "evocative representation." Appearing in an array of qualitative research studies, evocative representations "deploy literary devices to re-create lived experience and evoke emotional responses" (1994, p. 521). Included in this class of evocative representations are "narratives of the self," "fictional representations," "poetic representation," and "ethnographic drama." Thus, evocative representations—as forms of research—generate new knowledge in ways that differ from the facts and hypotheses generated in traditional research media. Evocative representations engage the imagination of the writer-researcher as she or he re-creates the experience and represents the reality of the people and events under study. According to Greene (2001), imagination "allows us to reach beyond, to reach—to reach not toward the predictable, but toward the possible" (p. 163). What is "possible" in an evocative representation is constrained by the data that inform the knowledge of the researcher as well as by the conventions of each literary genre. In "The Culture Club, 1909," information about Elizabeth DeMary and The Culture Club in Rupert, Idaho, as well as information about the socio-educational status of women settlers and the women's club movement, provided the historical data that constrained the woman's thoughts as she gazes out over the canal, as reported in the poem by Armstrong.

To validate the young woman's monologue, Woodworth-Ney checked the poem for consistency with historical information. Thus, our first collaborative actions grew from the need to research our subject. For example, in lines 3 and 8 of "The Culture Club, 1909," the word "station" and "laborer" were selected over "class," and "worker," which weren't in wide use as sociological terms in 1909. Besides word choice, we addressed contextual issues reported in the poem. Newspapers and club yearbooks of the time reveal that women's clubs typically met in the middle of the afternoon on weekdays (as noted in line 30). Although photographers didn't typically document the opening of a relatively small canal, they did photograph dignitaries at the dedication ceremonies when water first flowed through major canals (as described in lines 34-36). Armstrong also worked in the specific names of the goddesses Ceres, Pomona, and Flora (lines 25 and 27), when he learned that they appeared in William Bittle Wells' promotional brochures, which were used by railroad companies to draw settlers out West (Fretwell, 2000). In lines 50-52, Mrs. Smithfield refers to Mary Hallock Foote's novel *The Chosen Valley*, which might have been read by a women's literary club in 1909, as it was published in 1892, and Elizabeth DeMary's personal library included volumes of Foote's work.

As a research process, then, the composition of "The Culture Club, 1909" began as inquiry, with questions about the identity of the unknown woman at the canal. The primary data sources were the two historical photographs. Secondary sources included Woodworth-Ney's talk at BookFest, her subsequent comments, and an historical study. Although Mrs. Smithfield is a fictional character, the poem attempts to represent accurately what the woman at the canal might have been like—to evoke a sense of her lived experience, based on what was possible in terms of the historical record.

VideoPoetry and Voice

Each VideoPoetry presentation consists of an introduction, which uses a factual, historical voice and then the poem, which uses the personal voice of an historical person. Richardson cites a need for evocative representations because traditional writing conventions, such as "the omniscient voice of science" and the "impersonal third person voice to explain 'observed phenomena'" (1994, p. 518) as well as prescribed writing formats, have added to the monotony of educational and social scientific writing and suppress the individual researcher's voice.

Van Manen also asserts the need for researchers' voices in the "human sciences" (including symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology, ethnography, ethnomethodology, critical theory, gender study, semiotics, and so on). Research in the human sciences examines the actions, culture, and consciousness of human beings in an attempt to discover their meanings (van Manen, 1990). In a similar vein, Richardson (1994) views qualitative scientific writing as a means of discovery rather than merely the means to "write up" the results of data analysis.

Richardson's idea of writing as inquiry proceeds from a postmodernist context, which is based on "doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the 'right' or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge" (p. 517). Viewed within this context, "writing is always partial, local, and situational, and … our Self is always present" (p. 520). Working with related concepts, Van Manen states that to do research in human science involves "description, interpretation, and self-reflective or critical analysis" (1990, p. 4). Van Manen asserts, "To do human science research is to be involved in the crafting of a text" (p. 78).

VideoPoetry and Historical Research

The narrative introduction, which precedes each VideoPoem, uses historical photographs, historical quotations, and a variety of effects to generate a sense of the historical context in which the poem occurs. The narrative, written by Woodworth-Ney, provides the historical context for the poetry and photography. For a professional historian, the personal elements of the research process are usually subsumed by the requirements of the profession. Historians attempt to *find* and *represent* the story of history; they do not *create* it (Novick, 1988, p. 1-2).

While historical narratives are limited by the constraints of the research, poetry is not. When linked with poetry and videography, historical research becomes evocative in ways it could not be otherwise. Richardson encourages researchers to use poetry and other literary forms as "evocative representations," which "re-create lived experiences and evoke emotional responses" (1994, p. 521). Writing women's history necessitates the use of non-traditional sources and non-traditional techniques; its use of women's writings–letters, stories, poetry–forces a reconsideration of language and of the ideology of narrative. The creative work of clubwomen on the sagebrush plains has much to say about nineteenth-century notions of gender, of modernity, and of the feminine contribution to cultural ideas of "the American West." In uncovering the stories of these women, and in weaving their stories into an historical narrative, Woodworth-Ney is conducting research *and* creating a construction of the

past that runs counter to the traditional "grand narrative" of history, which has emphasized male achievements in the public sphere.

For Woodworth-Ney writing narratives for the project has been challenging also because she is writing for a non-academic audience with little historical background, and writing text to be experienced only in audio form. She had to fight against the urge to use language that would not be readily accessible to a listening audience. The exercise of writing for a listening audience, however, has improved the accessibility of all of the historical narratives that Woodworth-Ney writes. If history is "all we have," as John Gaddis has written (2002, p. 3), it should be both accessible and evocative as well as analytical and well-researched. History provides a view of what is possible, but the academic field of history has at times alienated the reading public with its detailed, third-person, narrative accounts. As prominent historian Patricia Nelson Limerick has noted about the writing style of professional historians, "the politically correct and the politically incorrect come together in the violence they commit against the English language" (Limerick, 2000, 334). *Culture of Reclamation* offers a way to use historical research to counter the dullness of academic prose and engage audiences in complex and sensual ways–through poetry, photographs, and videography. History once "had its presiding Muse (Clio), a secure place in the culture of the reading public, and a range of rhetorical and stylistic conventions," all of which were absorbed by professionalization (Tosh, 1991, p. 128). Participation in cross-disciplinary projects such as *Culture of Reclamation* revives Clio by emphasizing and affirming history's sometimes neglected but significant evocative nature.

Visual Media and Research

Since the invention of still photography in the 19th century, the photographic image, whether solitary or sequenced into motion pictures, has been a powerful tool for documenting and interpreting the nature and function of our physical and social realities. Theories of film have often stressed the realistic, objective quality of the visual image: we see what was there, not what someone's selective memory remembers at a later (hours, years later) date.

But photography is also fictive and subjective. The photographer chooses the time, the place, the subject, the pose, the camera lens, the angle of each photograph, the focus and framing, the recording medium and the length of exposure. What is captured in the photograph is a reality, but whether it is representative or significant we cannot be so certain.

So photography's "writing with light" is both a documentary *and* creative process, as is most historical and academic writing. Photography is most valuable for recording external reality—what things look like. Motion picture film and video allow us to see this reality unfold over time as process. We get to see how things and people function. To make sense of these images fully, and especially to understand the inner reality of human photographic subjects, we depend on words. Video allows people to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories. Dead people's words can be quoted by a voice-over narrator and even imagined by a poet when the records of their words are inadequate.

What, then, does this have to do with research? Research consists of gathering, analyzing and presenting data. Photography can provide primary research data—original, historical photographs. In addition, the written quotations (and the poetry inspired by the photos and written data) can be incorporated into a video's narration, providing additional information, detail, analysis and explanation. Music can convey a mood or sensibility to complement and

interpret the words and images. Together these audio-visual elements are the medium for publication—presenting this research to the public.

Yet this type of research is substantively and methodologically different from traditional "scientific research." It involves a creative and interpretive element that is different in degree and kind from the traditional paradigm. The assumptions that all worthwhile "scholarly activity" involves "research" modeled on that of the physical sciences and that "publication" consists exclusively of presenting one's ideas in a highly specialized language intended for and accessible to only a small group of experts in a particular subdivision of one's field must be reexamined and, we would argue, rejected.

Scholarly activity, it seems to us, is what scholars do professionally, and publication is the process of making this work available to the public—which includes both specialists and non-specialists. A drama professor directing or acting in a play may be as important as or more important than writing an analysis of a character in *Hamlet*. As a professor who teaches media production, Lutze thinks it is extremely important not merely to divide his time between teaching media studies/production and writing about media. He needs to actually *do* production—haul a camera out to the desert, figure out how to capture still images onto video, sit down in the editing lab and start combining shots and sound into a production that is engaging, articulate and informative.

Video Editing as Collaborative Research

During the editing phase of our collaboration, all three of us became involved in the construction of the multi-layered text that makes a VideoPoem. The video medium required weaving together the recorded poem with the images of historical photographs, brochures, and books. In our second VideoPoem, "Acts of Reclamation" (see the appendix), videography of current farmland and the sagebrush plain also became a key element of composition. Whereas "The Culture Club, 1909" demonstrates the role of women's clubs in generating the culture of newly formed irrigated settlement communities, "Acts of Reclamation" explores the dream of irrigating the desert and the challenges faced by irrigation project engineers, laborers, and farmers.

Our process began with recording the voice-overs for the narrative introductions, which Woodworth-Ney had written, and the two poems. In addition, we recorded a musician playing Beethoven's "Minuet in G" for use with a video sequence of fruit trees in bloom. Using editing software (*Premiere and Final Cut*), we built each video presentation with multiple audio and visual digital tracks.

Video editing requires an enormous amount of time and effort. Lutze and Armstrong spent on average two hours per week during the school year as well as six hours per week for four weeks each summer. We matched each word, phrase, and sentence of the narrated poem to still photographs and video footage; the pacing and rhythm of the voice-over had to be coordinated to the length and complexity of the video shots as well as to their content in order to produce a coherent and effective experience in the intended audience.

Sometimes during the editing we found it necessary to revise the poem's text. In the original version of "The Culture Club," Mrs. Smithfield asks her husband "But please if you won't have my picture made," which was an attempt to capture her formal Victorian speaking style, but it proved to be confusing when we considered that a listening audience would not

be able to go back to re-read her complicated syntax. Thus, we simplified it to read, "But if you please, don't have my picture made" (line 29).

Integrating Visual Media and Poems

As with "Culture Club, 1909," two photographs inspired "Acts of Reclamation": a photograph of a canal worker holding a shovel and Mary Hallock Foote's illustration *The Irrigating Ditch* (1889). These two images inspired two stanzas, which express the settlers' dreams of owning a family farm. Often the photographic images in a VideoPoem illustrate, clarify, and specify the words. Real laborers sweat in the hot sun; society ladies in white dresses seem to blossom in the harsh, uncivil landscape. The photographs, however, are not just literal illustrations of the poetic lines, but an attempt to create a sense of the times. The few photos that we began with were augmented by other archival photos from the period, particularly governmental documentation of its efforts to control and channel nature by a massive alteration of the landscape.

As a videographer, Lutze was able to capture new images of surging rivers, of windswept desert sage. Despite the dams, the canals, and the farms, ranches and cities they engendered, much of the raw power of the land remains unchanged and untamed. Power lines and fences intruded at times and the sounds of planes, cars and lawn mowers interrupted our recording of the sounds of birds and insects, but we found a modern continuity with the old photographs. Unlike the early still photos, these video images move and are in color. Video images in color vivify the irrigated desert plain as breezes riffle over grassy hills to apple orchards blooming in early spring.

The video editing work on this project was the last element in the collaboration; it was conducted within the constraints of a pre-existent framework. We often didn't have one photo that contained all of the elements mentioned in one sentence of the poem. If we edited several photographs into one sequence, it would seem very fast and jarring. So we would have to improvise--either finding a more general image or taking a less literal approach. A long take of a flowing canal or of sagebrush touched by a light wind did not always relate directly to the poet's words, but enhanced the general mood and was sufficiently static to allow the viewer's attention to focus on the words rather than the picture.

Yet the conception from the outset was to allow the images and sounds some autonomy. The selection and ordering of the images was guided by the poetry—which was the "script" for the VideoPoem—but the images also have their own obstinate materiality and specificity. And, incorporating as it does the old photos that prompted Armstrong's poetry, the video is a reassertion of the original idea, a spiraling return to the point of departure, a multi-level contemplation and re-contemplation of the meanings preserved in these images.

VideoPoetry as an Educational Prototype

Coming to view our VideoPoetry project as scholarship helped to transform us as professors. The historian has become more accepting of evocative transformations as a form of research, and has grown as a writer by writing for general audiences in addition to other historians. By increasing his activity as a videomaker, Lutze has broadened his professorial role; he has become more resourceful as an editor by applying video techniques to poetic scripts and

historical narratives. The poet has enlarged his view of poetry, which can explore historical possibilities as well as contribute to a new kind of aesthetic experience in VideoPoems.

As professors, each of us values and enjoys teaching and is committed to it. In the first several years of working together, we began to see the educational potential of VideoPoetry as collaborative projects for students as well as for other teachers and professors. As a professor of education, Armstrong had become familiar with a strategy for use with secondary students that had much in common with evocative representations. Imaginative Writing involves students using information from historical sources to create journal entries, personal letters, newspaper articles, poems, and so forth, as if they had been written by historical figures or about historical events (Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 2001). Because all academic subjects and fields have a history of people and events, Imaginative Writing has been presented by educators as a "content literacy strategy," which is appropriate to apply in any subject or field to engage students with primary and secondary sources. Such Imaginative Writing assignments encourage students to develop an understanding of and empathy for historical people and their experiences in a particular place (Loffer, 1998).

We discuss our vision of this educational strategy application, which focuses on the use of VideoPoetry with secondary students working in cross-disciplinary settings, in our paper "VideoPoetry: Integrating video, poetry and history in the classroom" (Armstrong, Lutze & Woodworth-Ney, 2009), which we presented at the 3rd International Conference on the Arts in Society in Birmingham, England. Our comments here focus on two salient features of that work that added new dimensions to our collaboration.

In the paper we emphasized the motivational benefits for students who collaborate in cross-disciplinary projects (Guthrie & McCann, 1997). Such projects can foster "aesthetic satisfaction," which grows from the challenge of the work as well as the maker's "idea which the work embodies" (Eisner, 2002b, 14). According to Renzulli, Leppien and Hays, "Imagination is the key to motivation" (2000, p. 11). As Eisner states, "it is the aesthetic that provides the natural high and contributes the energy we need to want to pursue an activity again and again" (2002a, p. 582).

The most significant aspect of our collaboration involved sitting down at the computer to compose together the entire paper. By this time we had spent hundreds of hours composing the audio-video tracks of the timelines of four VideoPoems, so writing a paper seemed to be a natural development in generating text together. Of course, the prose format presented its own challenges, and we responded by developing composing rhythms that suited the individual background knowledge each of us brought to the different subtopics. For example, Armstrong took the lead and "composed out loud" for a couple of paragraphs on the topic of the continuum from teacher constraints to student choices in planning project-based assignments. Similarly, Lutze spoke extensively on the topic of student group/self-evaluation criteria for collaborative video projects in the college classroom. On most subtopics, however, such as the purposes of a VideoPoetry project or choosing a project subject, we spontaneously alternated composing a sentence or two out loud. Every paragraph or two we both made suggestions for clarifying concepts, further elaborating on a subject, or refining a phrase to make it precise.

This composing process reminds us of having a series of stimulating intellectual conversations over dinner with a close friend at a fine restaurant—an activity described this way by Virginia Woolf:

> And thus by degrees was lit, halfway down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound subtle and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse (1929, p. 11).

Our editing activity seems to have similar qualities, that is, good fare, good company, and high satisfaction!

VideoPoetry as Public History

VideoPoetry is a form of public scholarship. Our first presentation of *Culture of Reclamation* to an audience outside of academe occurred at the Centennial Celebration of Twin Falls, Idaho, in 2004. Our presentation drew more than a hundred people to the Twin Falls Public Library, including the widow of Roger Lewis, whose collection of photographs from the nearby Milner Dam project in 1905 we had located in the Library of Congress and used in "Acts of Reclamation." Our first three VideoPoems drew upon the Twin Falls Public Library's extensive collection of photographs by professional photographer Clarence E. Bisbee. Beginning in 1906, for thirty years the husband-and-wife team of Clarence and Jessie Robinson Bisbee documented the origins and development of Twin Falls from a new settlement to the center of agricultural activity for the newly irrigated area. Our work with the staff of the Twin Falls Public Library has been an extraordinary collaboration, as they have generously made available to us their considerable resources because they value our purpose of bringing the Bisbees' work to light for public view.

We plan to make *Culture of Reclamation* available to schools in Southern Idaho and to include it in a traveling exhibition on the culture of the early irrigation communities in the Intermountain West. The dissemination of scholarship and research to audiences outside of the academy, including archives, museums, public media, cinema, and documentaries, has created a sub-discipline within History—Public History—with its own conferences and journals, of which the national Council on Public History and the journal *Public Historian* are the best known. Public history and historians' engagement with non-academic audiences encourage the public to appreciate the ways in which the past has shaped where and how we live today. When children and young-adult students participate in cross-disciplinary assignments like VideoPoetry projects, they strengthen their cultural roots. They also challenge long-held assumptions—the grand narratives—of the past, and participate in the recreation of history.

Conclusion

When completed, *Culture of Reclamation* will be about fifty minutes long and will consist of an historical introduction to the project followed by six VideoPoems (each with an introduction). Our collaboration has changed our notion of what research can be in our respective fields. The process of integrating these various media—poetry, history, historical photographs and video—has changed how we view each medium separately.

Culture of Reclamation is grounded in the transformation of the arid American West, which occurred about one hundred years ago. By focusing our work on the irrigation of southern Idaho, we have come to a greater understanding of the region where we work and

live. The video medium allows us to share these insights as public history—the dissemination of scholarship and research to audiences outside of the academy. VideoPoetry compels us to envision collaboratively a narrative about our regional foundations. Through video, we are able to present to a broad audience the often overlooked but transformational power of irrigation projects to turn the arid West into a land of bounty.

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Appendix

THE CULTURE CLUB, 1909
By James Armstrong

How improbable for any woman alone!
I explained to Mr. Smithfield,
And especially for a lady of our station
To be seated as though perched above the canal
Buttoned to the chin in one's Sunday best
Set out among dust, sagebrush, and tumbleweeds
Under the hot sun without an umbrella
Just days after laborers and animals
Ceased their rough work and exhausting toil—
To which he said, Ahem!
Then replied, My dear Mrs. Smithfield,
I remind you that we came into this land
To transform the desert into a garden,
And the new Sunnywest Canal,
A river made by the hands of men,
Will transform wilderness into civilization.
Thus, it seems entirely fitting to project officials
That the presence of a lady—yourself—at the Canal
Will in similar fashion bring civilization to the desert.
And, I might add, My Dear (Ladies, no looks now!)
A lady brings Beauty, elegance, and refinement
To the rough finish left at the end of men's work
After all the digging, scraping and hauling are done,
Not unlike what a statue brings to a garden
Such as Ceres and Pomona in marmoreal splendor
Blessing the irrigated farm with overflowing cornucopia
And Goddess Flora making the desert bloom.
Well, I said, I suppose if that is your wish, My Dear—
But if you please, don't have my picture made
On Wednesday next at two o'clock in the afternoon
For it absolutely wouldn't do
To disappoint the ladies of The Culture Club!
To which entreaty he rejoined expansively
That pictures of all the dignitaries would be made
On Sunday next at the ceremony.
Then my picture would be made by the canal
Immediately after the dedication of the dam
Before the picnic is fully underway.
Ladies, as you well can see,
There I sit profiled in my Sunday dress
Staring into vast and empty distances

As if I gazed into our improved future with irrigated lands
(And as the Lord is my witness
I'm thankful for the promise of progress)
But is it not also suitable
To have me placed well above the dusty banks?
And Ladies, while I sat there
As still as a statue for the longest minute,
Do you know what thought came into my mind?
Well, I recalled our lively discussion
Of Mary Hallock Foote's *The Chosen Valley*
At the most recent meeting of our club.
A pleasant thought indeed!
To bring culture to the desert canal
Along with (Ahem!) Beauty, elegance and refinement!
I felt the slightest motion of a breeze,
Not so much as to blur a curl while the picture was made
(See how the wave holds its shape with distinction)
Yet the desert air seemed to rise from the water
With a light, sweet coolness that restored my spirit.
I could hardly wait until our meeting today
To tell you how it was.

ACTS OF RECLAMATION
By James Armstrong

An old album tied with a silk bow holds photographs, text and poems. While a boy pumps the pedals on the player piano in his grandmother's parlor, you untie the bow, look into the album and begin to read.

Silence lays claim to us like monotonous sky.
Silence fills the river basin with emptiness past loneliness.
Nothing moves out there for hours sometimes,
Where you wait to hear a breeze.

Ancient dreams of water called us west:
The Nile's yearly flood drowning the earth;
Our imminent return to The Garden with diverted water
To make the desert bloom.

Where the Snake cuts a fry-pan shape across Idaho,
West from the Tetons across lava and sagebrush to the Boise River—
With its narrow corridor of sheltering cottonwoods—
There lies the cradle of reclamation.

No cicadas make the treeless desert scream.
No lightning bugs flicker and dive in the stark night.

After a day without speech, silence drones like locusts
In the distance of an unfulfilled mind.

The scraper's grating sings to the men like progress
As the blade drags rocks and gravel through volcanic soil.
Horses in traces bring to mind our fathers' teams
Plowing through dark Illinois earth.

Sweat beads run down dirt-streaked cheeks and arms
Dripping into the canal bed where he digs and dreams,
Sowing the future's seed from which a man-made river
And his family farm will spring forth.

Scientific principles will transform desert into farmland:
Manna released in measured amounts into the canal, past a headgate,
Trickling through the irrigating ditch toward mother and baby
Near her husband who tends the stream.

Just as the colonists dreamed a City upon a Hill
We're planning a perfect society here, a garden Utopia,
To reclaim a portion of our souls lying fallow
In this still unredeemed land.

About the Authors

Dr. Peter Lutze
Peter Lutze grew up in Oklahoma where his father served as pastor to black parishes. After graduating from Valparaiso University, he obtained an M.F.A. in Filmmaking from Brandeis University and a J.D. at the University of Wisconsin, where he also completed his doctoral dissertation on the German film director and social theorist, Alexander Kluge. Since 1990 he has taught at Boise State University, where he has also served as Director of University Television Productions. He was a founder and served for several years as Chair of Treasure Valley Public Access Television. He has produced numerous films and videos.

Dr. James Armstrong
James Armstrong has been a professor at Boise State University since 1992 where he teaches courses in reading education as well as reading and study strategies. As an undergraduate at Stanford University, he majored in English and completed the Honors Program in Humanities. He went on there to receive his master's degree in education with a California teaching credential in English. He received his doctorate in reading education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has written two textbooks, Reading Tools for College Study and Patterns and Connections, and two books of poetry, Landscapes of Epiphany and Moon Haiku. He enjoys reading, writing, bicycling, running, golf, and photography.

Dr. Laura Woodworth-Ney
Laura Woodworth-Ney serves as Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs at Idaho State University. The former chair of the ISU Department of History, she serves as executive editor of the Center for Idaho History and Politics at Boise State University, and is the founding co-editor (with two colleagues) of the Idaho State Historical Society's Idaho Landscapes: The Magazine of Idaho History, Science, and Art. From 2003 to 2008 she served as editor-in-chief of Idaho Yesterdays: The Journal of Idaho History and she currently serves as the editor of a scholarly book series published by the University of Arizona Press, entitled Women's Western Voices. She is a prolific scholar, having published nearly 30 articles, book reviews, and scholarly encyclopedia entries, as well as several books. From 2000 to 2007 she served as Co-Director of Women's Studies, and from 2006 to 2007 she served on the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate. Woodworth-Ney earned her Ph.D. in American history and public history from Washington State University.

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Giorgos Tsiakalos, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.
Siva Vaidhyanathan, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA.
Cheryl A. Wells, University of Wyoming, Laramie, USA.
Zhang Zhiqiang, Nanjing University, Nanjing, People's Republic of China.
Chris Ziguras, Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

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