

# **American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship**

Thinking and Acting in the  
Local and Global Commons

**Edited by Joni Adamson  
and Kimberly N. Ruffin**

With a Foreword by Philip J. Deloria

First published 2013  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

American studies, ecocriticism, and citizenship : thinking and acting in the local and global commons / edited by Joni Adamson and Kimberly N. Ruffin.

p. cm. — (Routledge interdisciplinary perspectives on literature ; 15)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ecocriticism. 2. Citizenship—History. 3. Ecology in literature. I. Adamson, Joni, 1958– II. Ruffin, Kimberly N., 1969–  
PN98.E36A44 2012  
809'.93355—dc23  
2012032780

ISBN13: 978-0-415-62823-5 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-06735-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by IBT Global

Printed and bound in the United States of America on sustainably sourced paper by IBT Global.

# 15 The Los Angeles Urban Rangers, Trailblazing the Commons

*Stephanie LeMenager*

Imagine a campfire circle, winsome campers telling stories, and a Ranger, seated outside the circle, strumming her guitar. Then add the following elements to the scene: the pyramidal peaks of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), the vertical cliff of a Wells Fargo corporate tower, and stories whose ghosts still walk, like the rat that one camper recalls from her recent hike through LA's impoverished Central City East neighborhood, popularly known as Skid Row. In the midst of the camper's rat story, a second Ranger intervenes. He's an African American man, about forty years old. As a long-time resident of Skid Row, he knows how to handle *rattus rattus* (L.), the urban rat. The proximity of LA's Bunker Hill with Skid Row makes the region an urban *ecotone*, a transition area between two biomes where we find overlapping communities of fauna. Bunker Hill is home to public venues like MOCA, the Cathedral of Our Lady of Los Angeles, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall. The populations of Skid Row and Bunker Hill mingle uneasily as gentrification gobbles up Skid Row properties, converting single-room-occupancy hotels (SROs) into galleries. When our Ranger finishes interpreting the rat, another camper asks him if he doesn't get frustrated with ignorant tourists, particularly museum people. He answers confidently, "I'm an educator. I tell people what I know. That's my job." He adds that when he walks through Skid Row at night, he appreciates its quietness.

I offer this scene from a recent public art event called Critical Campout (2011) to introduce the Los Angeles Urban Rangers, an art collective founded in 2004. The LA Urban Rangers designed and performed Critical Campout as the culmination of a summer-long collaboration with MOCA that also featured a stroll into the channelized Los Angeles River and an evening of downtown hikes along freeways, up the "peaks" of the Bonaventure Hotel (via its glass elevators), and into outdoor office plazas which the Rangers poetically renamed "corporate meadows." The River Ramble, and the specter of the LA River that hangs over the Rangers' project, will figure later in this chapter. For the moment, I'll return to the Critical Campout, where visitors hiked the Skid Row/Bunker Hill ecotone, gathered in campfire circles, built a utopian street shelter, and slaked their thirst at a tap

water bar that lent a gustatory dimension to environmental injustice. The tap water from wealthier west LA tasted “clean,” as one camper put it, in comparison to the waters of less affluent areas. The Rangers’ printed *Water Bar Menu* accentuates these differences, for instance describing East LA’s water as characterized by “a big nose, a rich vein of sulfate, and exceptional turbidity” (“Water Bar Menu”). As night deepened, a group of campers returned to the tents they’d pitched in the MOCA plaza for an asphalt sleep-over. This chapter’s opening recollection is drawn from my own experience as a critical camper, and I think it highlights the effort of translation that is central to the LA Urban Rangers’ appeal. Critical campers contemplated extreme wealth discrepancies, racialized poverty, and the potentially parasitic relationship of arts communities to the urban poor through temperate, ecological metaphors. The metaphors, and the hospitable Rangers, moderated tense conversations between the museum’s public and the Skid Row activists who participated in the hike and the campfire chats.

As an art collective, the LA Urban Rangers can be understood within the traditions of community arts practice, temporary public art, the conversational practice that critic Grant Kester calls “dialogical art” (9–10, 13) and “relational aesthetics,” the French curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud’s term for artworks whose goal is “to actually be ways of living and models of action” (13). California has been a hotbed for this kind of engaged art since the 1960s, and currently the LA Urban Rangers share practices and commitments with a robust community of Los Angeles-based groups such as Invisible Five, Fallen Fruit, and Finishing School. All of these collectives investigate what the artist and critic Sarah Kanouse calls “social nature.” By “social nature,” Kanouse means the socio-ecological relationships that make up modernity as we live and know it, with its injustice, waste, pollution, wit, and beauty (“A Post-Naturalist” 168).<sup>1</sup> Finishing School, for example, presented a lively project called M.O.L.D. (2009), which the group describes as “a hot zone-themed installation and workshop that investigates food in crisis.” Audience members were invited to join in a variety of playful experiments, including building their own “amateur bio-indicators” (Finishing School).

The founders of the LA Urban Rangers, whom I interviewed for this chapter, recognize the extremities of Los Angeles as an impetus for the city’s strong arts focus on postnatural ecologies. Ranger Sara Daleiden notes that “what LA has given us . . . is *so much room* to ask what urban nature is” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). This regional strength also reflects the influence of the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI), which was founded in 1994. The CLUI became a gathering place in LA for people interested in interpreting the built environment and experimenting with presentation strategies drawn from both popular culture traditions like the bus tour and avant-garde practice like the Situationist *dérive*.<sup>2</sup> The CLUI describes itself as a politically disinterested “educational organization,” and its various media—from its flagship on-line archive, *Land Use*

*Database*, to its guide books, interactive CD-ROMs, and tours—offer deadpan delivery of geographical information that falls out of conventional maps, from nuclear test sites to natural gas infrastructure (The Center for Land Use Interpretation).<sup>3</sup> In roughly the same moment when academic historians like William Cronon and Jenny Price were dismantling the mythos of “wilderness” and “nature,” the CLUI’s Culver City gallery space nurtured a group of academics, activists, and infrastructure geeks who remade themselves as collaborative artists.

In the case of the LA Urban Rangers, the intellectual movement toward the nature of modernity lives particularly close to home. Jenny Price, author of the paradigm-shifting environmental history *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America* (1999), is one of the group’s founders, and another founder, Emily Scott, moved to LA with the intention of following in Price’s footsteps after picking up *Flight Maps* in a bookstore in Moab, Utah, where she was working as a National Park Service Ranger. Scott reinvented herself in LA as a different kind of Ranger, inspiring the group’s trademark persona. The four founders of the LA Urban Rangers are Scott, Price, Sara Daleiden, and Therese Kelly. Daleiden works primarily as an artist, Kelly is an architect and urban designer, Price a nonfiction writer and historian, and Scott now holds a doctorate in art history, describing herself as a “creative scholar” (E. Scott personal interview, September 8, 2011). When these four women “put on the Ranger hat” and became an arts collective in 2004, they recognized, in Daleiden’s words, that they had found a way to “open up how things can get talked about, which can also mean *where* they get talked about” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). I’ll delineate how I see the group reinventing the idea of “the commons” below. For now, suffice it to say that since 2004 two new Rangers have joined the group and several volunteers have donned the hat to test the possibilities of common ground. Our hike leader at the Critical Campout was a guest Ranger from the wryly named LAPD, or Los Angeles Poverty Department, which is an art collective based in Skid Row.<sup>4</sup>

The story of the LA Urban Rangers inevitably revolves around the Urban Ranger persona, which the group calls “the delivery mechanism” for its explorations of urban ecologies. As noted, Emily Scott first suggested the Ranger as a platform, although all group members have contributed to its development—from seasonal uniforms (hats, badges, and khaki pants or shorts) to an irrepressibly friendly affect. Scott spent years working as a National Park Service Ranger in Alaska and Utah, where in a sense she previewed the Urban Rangers project by pushing the limits of the Park Service program. “I was always interested in heady ideas,” she reflects.

I did a program at Arches National Park that was on Hollywood representations of canyon country and how they framed that landscape. . . . I was taking this theoretically inflected set of questions and translating it into a language and a form that would be engaging for a really broad



Figure 15.1 Los Angeles Urban Rangers, Malibu Public Beaches 2007–2010. Core LA Urban Rangers members, from left to right: Therese Kelly, Sara Daleiden, Emily Scott, and Jenny Price. Credit: Tom Queally.

lay public, which also would include people from across the political spectrum. Lots of Mormons traveling down from Salt Lake, and lots of environmental activists coming to go backpacking, [and] recreationists. As a Ranger, I needed to translate what were historical-conceptual questions into very accessible terms. I did a related program in Glacier Bay National Park in Alaska that looked at a history of visual images of the park and the kinds of technologies that have been used to picture and investigate that landscape, and how they have shaped our understanding of the place: everything from early maps and engravings to contemporary cutting-edge scientific imagery. Not your typical, run-of-the-mill ranger programs. (E. Scott, personal interview, September 8, 2011)

Although the Park Service's claims to objectivity irritate Scott—"part of my larger project is to explode that notion of objectivity," she laughs—she recognizes "Ranger etiquette" as an effective communication tool. The Ranger persona invites trust because of its seemingly apolitical, open stance. "As a civil servant, your job is to speak to a diverse park-going public and let them make their own decisions" (E. Scott, personal interview, September 8, 2011). The Ranger radiates "hospitality," "making people feel at home" in a way that summons a sense of belonging, of *being in public*, for diverse crowds (E. Scott, personal interview, September 8, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

## COMMON GROUND

*common.* c. 1300, “belonging to all, general,” from O.Fr. *comun* “common, general, free, open, public” (9c., Mod.Fr. *commun*), from L. *communis* “in common, public, general, not pretentious, shared by all or many,” from PIE *\*ko-moin-i-* “held in common,” compound adjective formed from *\*ko-* “together” + *\*moi-n-*, suffixed form of base *\*mei-* “change, exchange” (see *mutable*), hence lit. “shared by all.” Second element of the compound also is the source of L. *munia* “duties, public duties, functions,” those related to *munia* “office.” (“common, n.” *Online Etymology Dictionary*)<sup>6</sup>

Given the vexed history of “the commons” in U.S. environmental history, the concept has to be reworked to introduce the questions of environmental justice that undergird much of the LA Urban Rangers’ relational practice. When the biologist Garrett Hardin published the influential article “The Tragedy of the Commons” in 1968, he aligned enduring environmental concerns (pollution, overconsumption) with a faddish horror of “personal liberty” linked to the social experimentation of the Sixties (1249).<sup>7</sup> With Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb* (1968), Hardin promoted the idea that only population control could redeem depleted resource commons such as ocean fisheries and the U.S. national parks. “Injustice is preferable to total ruin,” he intoned, referring to the necessity of private property and legal inheritance (Hardin 1249). While Hardin did not advocate the privatization of the national parks, he imagined “allocating” the right to enter them, perhaps through a lottery (Hardin 1245). His misinterpretation of the English commons and the U.S. parks as unregulated communal property complemented an ideological assault on public use that still undergirds the elite bias of mainstream U.S. environmentalism. The national parks were a symbolic pivot for Hardin and for more charismatic environmentalists like Ed Abbey (Abbey 423).<sup>8</sup> In the parks, public place in the U.S. reached an ideal form—and betrayed its impracticalities. When the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha delivered his shot across the bow of the American wilderness aesthetic in the late 1980s, he identified the U.S. national park system with an anti-local, anti-human bias: “environmentalism by the state and the conservation elite” (73). With the origins of some North American national parks tangled in the displacement of indigenous Americans, the parks suggest a complex North American response to the dream of a common place, shared by all.

The layered meanings of the national parks as an American commons inflect the LA Urban Ranger persona, which typically presides over contested ground. The Urban Rangers gravitate toward places where the idea of the public has become untenable. The Malibu beaches are a prime example of a public resource withheld from the commons by super-elites. The LA Urban Rangers’ *Malibu Public Beaches* project (2007–2010) wittily reclaimed this space, leading approximately 1,200 people on “safaris” on

Malibu's beaches and equipping them with a how-to map guide of beach access points and public easements. The *Malibu Public Beaches* map guide offers instruction about fake signage ("Visit your local hardware store to make your own 'no parking' sign for as little as \$25"), beach fauna ("while the residents are 89% Caucasian, day-use weekend visitors include a more diverse array"), and self-defense against irate security guards ("a copy of the CA Coastal Act is not necessary but can be useful") (*Malibu Public Beaches* guide).<sup>9</sup> Maps have been part of the LA Urban Rangers project since their first appearance at the artist Fritz Haeg's and architect Francois Perrin's *gardenLab experiment* exhibition back in 2004.<sup>10</sup> Therese Kelly argues that "maps are an important tool for our project, especially because the project is talking about things that are invisible, all these invisible infrastructures that inform the way we behave and use the city, and maps . . . make visible these systems" (T. Kelly, personal interview, December 1, 2011). In the broadest sense, the maps facilitate what Sara Daleiden describes as the group's twin goals of "translation and distribution" (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). All of the LA Urban Rangers' maps are available on the group's website. The California Coastal Commission has used the Rangers' *Malibu Public Beaches* map in their efforts to open up beach access (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011).<sup>11</sup> Collaboration with state agencies underlines the civic purpose integral to the LA Urban Rangers' art.

Dialogue with state agencies, engineers, hydrologists, politicians, and developers has been a feature of so-called eco-art since the pioneering work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, California-based artists who began staging ecological interventions in the 1970s. The site-specific, collaborative work of artists like the Harrisons spawned contemporary social service entities like New York City's Center for Urban Pedagogy, a non-profit educational organization that uses "the power of design and art to improve civic engagement" ("What We Do" 2012).<sup>12</sup> Conversation with government and business people, according to historian Peter Selz, is a crucial component of "social sculpture"—meaning action-oriented art that aims to restructure society (Selz 226).<sup>13</sup> The LA Urban Rangers fell into this larger civic effort somewhat accidentally, when they were discovered by real park rangers. Jenny Price explains:

One of the things that has been incredibly gratifying over the course of the group's life is this wonderful relationship we have with the real rangers, who are the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Their operating arm, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, funded our Malibu safaris. Initially we were a little bit worried that they would think that we were making fun of them. So we didn't alert them or ask them for money before the summer, because I thought they might try to shut us down. Then they came to us and said, "We really like what you're doing on the beaches." Because they do a lot of work



trying to open up the beaches in Malibu—and [they asked], “Do you want some funding?” So then they funded us. And then we worked with them to actually consult, taking their rangers to the beaches to show them what we were doing, because they want to start doing their own beach programs, and just passing on all that knowledge that we have. And so there’s been this wonderful slippage—almost—between the actual, real rangers and the fake Rangers. (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011)

The Santa Monica Conservancy also contributed funds to the Urban Rangers’ Los Angeles River Ramble, part of the 2011 MOCA series. Therese Kelly notes how important these partnerships have been in creating lasting infrastructure out of time-bound performances.<sup>14</sup>

Although the Ranger persona is the lynchpin to the group’s collaborative practice and the delivery mechanism for its many translating tools—e.g., ecological metaphors, interpretive maps, directed walks—Price acknowledges that Ranger rhetoric doesn’t work for everyone: “It’s really important to ask, *Who exactly participates in this rhetoric?* It’s not for all Americans, necessarily. It’s not an accident that the four co-founders are Midwesterners from a certain generation” (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). When the LA Urban Rangers collaborated with the Los Angeles Poverty Department at the Critical Campout, they repurposed the Urban Ranger as a guardian of precisely the sort of human life (non-white, poor) that sometimes has been disregarded for the sake of the national parks. Hiking through Skid Row also functioned as an antidote to the old-fashioned genre of the slum tour, with hikers forbidden from photography and from the unself-conscious spectatorship typical of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century forays into so-called ghettos like the Five Points area of New York City.<sup>15</sup> With a less edgy style than the Lesbian Rangers, a Canadian collective that points out the unnaturalness of conventional gender performance, the LA Urban Rangers dismantle “nature” to reveal occluded histories.<sup>16</sup> They also tactically use the “nature” idea to make urban environments more accessible and recognizably public. The group’s presence in corporate plazas with restrictions on public use, for instance, makes the unlikely statement that such places should be conceived as natural. In an American context, “natural” implies belonging to everyone, even if the inclusivity of “everyone” has been undermined by the elitism of some environmentalists.

Jenny Price elaborates on how the group came to see itself as not only reclaiming public places but also reclaiming the idea of the public.

The group in general learned the value of the Urban Ranger for emphasizing “public,” and creating publics in public spaces, public activities in public spaces. The Ranger is the ultimate guardian of public spaces, because the national parks are where there still is a sense of the public,

that this is our great national heritage, and it belongs to all of us. That rhetoric is still strong in ways that, I think, it has been weakened so much in the past thirty years in almost every kind of space or geography. So here we are, we're the great guardians of our most treasured public spaces, but we're doing it in Los Angeles. It's actually turned out to be a really powerful character for talking about a public—What's "public"? Why is it not "public"? It's a powerful tool for re-public-izing LA spaces. (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011)

Price adds that part of the "re-public-izing LA" project involves simply placing people in areas deemed off-limits, abandoned, or unsafe. Speaking of the MOCA series, she notes that "both for Bunker Hill, and then particularly the LA River Ramble—these are places that clear out at night. They're desolate at night. These are great, big public spaces (though so much of Bunker Hill isn't truly public, it's supposed to be *for* the public). We populated those spaces" (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). Price recognizes the dysfunctional public space in LA's downtown as a byproduct of the Community Reinvestment Act, which encourages private development. The more than 50-mile-long Los Angeles River presents an especially dramatic appropriation of an ostensibly public resource. In the 1930s, the Army Corps of Engineers began paving the river's channel and banks, turning LA's primary water source into a glorified "storm drain," in the words of the advocacy group Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) ("About FoLAR"). Price calls the LA River "one of the greatest disappearing acts in environmental history" (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011).

The Urban Rangers' LA River Ramble originated at MOCA's Geffen Contemporary, located in the Arts District that abuts the channelized river. To enter the LA River through the underpass at the 6th Street bridge, urban ramblers applied to the Rangers for an "LA River Trail Access Permit," which did double duty as a pedagogical tool. "Acceptance of Full Responsibility for Trail Usage" included our signed endorsement of the following:

- I understand that I am entering a major public space.
- I understand that the LA River is a river and not a flood control channel.
- I understand that I can ask my federal, state, county, or city representatives at any time to open this essential public space for safe and consistent public use. ("Backcountry Permit")

Getting the river permits required standing in line at a "Riverside Ranger Station" with fellow ramblers, and inevitably we broke into conversations about the river—among ourselves and with guest Rangers from FoLAR and other advocacy groups. Such spontaneous sociability typifies Urban Rangers' events. Walking into the river at the 6th Street accessway mapped for us by the Rangers created another opportunity to feel oneself becoming

public in response to a potentially public place. At 6th Street the river looks like a concrete speedway. Yet when I entered it in the company of hundreds of eager pedestrians, the industrial bridge overhead assumed the emotional valence of a cathedral. The mere presence of others expecting something in the line of the sublime—the sort of thing we’d see at Yosemite—changed the look of this misspent place, or at least my reading of what is still there, its light and its scale. Price adds that the first goal of LA River activists is to get people to experience the river: “When people ask me, just me, not Ranger Jenny, ‘Come talk to us about the River,’ I say, ‘No, come to the River’ ” (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). This emphasis on embodied experience harkens back to the CLUI bus tours and, deeper into art history, the psycho-geographical mapping of the Situationists.

When I spoke with Sara Daleiden about how she thinks that art acts in the world, she began by noting that “artists are good at . . . taking language as material, whether you want to use a visual language, or a verbal one, or a performative one, or some combination” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). This movement beyond text-based pedagogy also anchors Therese Kelly’s sense of how the LA Urban Rangers create public affects that last longer than their discrete performances. She identifies the public as the primary medium through which the group realizes itself.

For instance, during our Downtown project, the normally deserted streets of LA were filled with people walking at night and feeling safe. Even if they didn’t understand what our overall metaphorical project was about, they just were out enjoying the night, the summer evening, with strangers in the city, in a place that’s not usually inhabited by pedestrians. That is successful. I feel like that’s enough—we’ve done something simply by enabling people to collectively experience and personally discover their own city. (T. Kelly, personal interview, December 21, 2011)

Most simply, I might argue that artists like the LA Urban Rangers “make” experience.

Jenny Price chooses the term “reimagination” to describe the fundamental action that the group performs. “Art is particularly good at going after basic assumptions,” she says. “It’s very good at juxtaposing what we know and what we don’t know, or what we assume and what we don’t tend to think about” (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). The LA Urban Rangers have been allied to the active reimagining of D.I.Y. art like Safari 7, a self-guided tour of “urban wildlife” along the 7 subway line in New York City, and PARK(ing) Day, which was originated in San Francisco by the collective Rebar. In 2005, Rebar’s Matt Passmore unfurled living sod in a street parking place, put a tree and bench on it, and sat out the duration of his meter. Since then, PARK(ing) Day has gone viral, thanks to an open-source guide on how to make parks in metered spaces. A recent

issue of *Public Art Review* features the LA Urban Rangers' MOCA series and PARK(ing) Day under the heading "DIY Park" and also recognizes the Occupy movement in terms of the reimagination of places and privileges withheld from the commons (A. Foster 29). While the overtly political Occupiers summon a different public than the hospitable LA Urban Rangers, both groups experiment with temporary common practice, avoiding the solidification of their gestures into systemic norms. The relationship between "being public" and time, or the problem of being public in time, has been important to artists and activists who want to encourage new spatial habits without foreclosing on possible futures.

For Therese Kelly, it's important to distinguish between activism, conventionally understood as taking action *for* others, and "activation," by which she means preparing people to act *for* themselves, ask questions, and develop their own commitments. "When people ask if we're activists, I say, 'No, we're not activists. We're activating a site, we're asking people to look and question, but we're asking questions, too.' We try to leave room for self-discovery and personal investigation" (T. Kelly, personal interview, December 21, 2011). Sara Daleiden's emphasis on the civic nature of the Rangers' art offers a deeper gloss on what the group intends by "activation." When I asked Daleiden what "civic" means for her, she defined civic practice as opening possibilities for who we can be in a common place. "Here's an interesting notion of the civic—keep finding temporary gestures to explore what your identity can be" (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). Following Daleiden, I enjoy considering the commons as *practice* not only in the sense of acting but also in the sense of making assays, where we assume that the gesture isn't finished, that we might do it better or differently.<sup>17</sup> Whenever a concept has as much hope packed into it as does "the commons," it resists settling into definition.

## SPECULATION GROUND

*speculation* (n.) late 14c., "contemplation, consideration," from O.Fr. *speculation*, from L.L. *speculationem* (nom. *speculatio*) "contemplation, observation," from L. *speculatus*, pp. of *speculari* "observe, from *specere* "to look at, view" (see *scope* (1)). Disparaging sense of "mere conjecture" is recorded from 1570s. Meaning "buying and selling in search of profit from rise and fall of market value" is recorded from 1774; short form *spec* is attested from 1794. ("Speculation, n.")<sup>18</sup>

This second section of my chapter takes its name from a remarkable feature in the city of Almere in the Netherlands. Almere is the site of the LA Urban Rangers' most extensive international project. For the Museum de Paviljoens in Almere, the Urban Rangers collaborated to create a trail system in a vacant lot. Daleiden speaks about her experience at the site, leading hikes for the program. "It was very phenomenological, about wandering in this

vacant lot,” she says. “We had this beautiful phrase, ‘When can a dead end wander?’” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). For the six months out of the year that Dutch weather allows, Almere’s meticulous mowers create the trails, and since they were installed (2008), other artists have responded by making new gestures in the space. In a culture that is “used to being public,” as Daleiden describes the Netherlands, an installation like this one met with less bureaucratic resistance than it might have in Los Angeles. Moreover, the vacant lot where the installation developed isn’t exactly a vacant lot, as we might understand that term in the U.S. It’s a space called a “speculation ground,” set aside for thinking like an artist. Daleiden explains:

This was extremely valuable land, it was right by the central train station and around attractive houses. A major architect/urban designer in the Netherlands had designed the city center abutting it, and so it was a space lying in wait. It was a beautiful premise; they call it a “speculatie grond,” a speculation ground. They planned for what they didn’t know. The Dutch are such amazing planners they even said, we’ll put a city block’s worth of space in the center for what we don’t know about where our identity is going to go. (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011)

This “calculated gesture of leaving things open” appealed to Daleiden’s sense of civic practice, and it invites comparison with U.S. cities where such gestures are rarely made. “We have all of these leftover spaces here, too,” Daleiden says of Los Angeles, “but I don’t think we decide to value them. Whereas in the Netherlands they decided they were going to leave the space open. *We’re going to admit what we don’t know*” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011).

The slippage between thought and spatial practice here compels—a speculation ground makes literal space out of speculating, which means either contemplating things or betting on the future value of things. Daleiden assures me that “speculation” in Dutch holds a similar double valence. I turn toward both senses of speculation—contemplating and investing in the future—for the next few paragraphs. Specifically, I’ll wonder alongside the LA Urban Rangers about how the translation of their site-specific work across cultures comments on the viability of a transnational notion of the commons.

The LA Urban Rangers have performed aspects of their work in the Netherlands and Sweden, and they have exhibited in the Netherlands, Mexico, and Canada. Some of their projects translate fairly smoothly. For example, the *Malibu Public Beaches* project tells a story of the predations of extreme wealth that proves resonant in other countries. Yet the Ranger persona, the master key to the group’s accessibility, has few equivalents outside of the U.S. and Canada. When Sara Daleiden worked in the Netherlands, she

wore the Urban Ranger uniform, she led hikes in the uniform, and she was interpreted by her local audience—as a “forester”: “They really associate ‘rangers’ with Westerns, like cowboy and Indian movies. The closest thing that they have in their culture is a forester. So they understood having a character that could guide a hike, but the sense of wilderness is not present” (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). For the Dutch, the forester suggests federal-level efforts to manage the Dutch land in a country where state design reaches as far as the sea bottom. The city of Almere sits on a polder, low-lying land that has been reclaimed from the sea and is protected by dikes and dams. “It’s one of the few countries that makes more of its country without conquering others,” Daleiden remarks. There’s an almost poetic redundancy to the idea of land art in a country of polders. The forester role didn’t take Daleiden too far away from her everyday persona as an artist. “Going on a walk as an art project was a common concept for a lot of people,” she says (S. Daleiden, personal interview, September 1, 2011). The sympathy for the project already present in Dutch culture made for a different kind of pleasure than what the Urban Rangers evoke in Los Angeles, where the group assumes its art to be premised on, again, the reimagination of place and of spatial practices like walking.

When Therese Kelly and Jenny Price brought the LA Urban Rangers to Sweden, they held a workshop with students where they explicitly sought authority figures equivalent to U.S. park rangers. Kelly recalls a series of unexpected translations: “One person said Pippi Longstocking, because she’s a thing-finder.” The students objected to the park ranger as a person who “interferes” and “regulates.” “In most of the Scandinavian countries they have this understood law that you can go anywhere in nature—including on other people’s properties—to camp for a night, and pick berries and mushrooms. So, pretty much the whole land is yours to explore” (T. Kelly, personal interview, December 21, 2011). Without the wilderness concept, the ranger figure loses charisma. The idea of “the commons” also fails to excite where “commons” aren’t extraordinary. Eventually the Swedish students settled on the figure of the “hut keeper,” which comes from Lapland, as a translation for “ranger.” Hut keepers are mythic, elderly figures who keep cabins for visitors in remote areas of the far north and who give strangers guidance. Swedish students imagined hut keepers outside of metro stations in suburban neighborhoods, guiding confused city dwellers. In short, the most privatized living areas they could conceive, suburbs, represented the greatest likeness to Lapland, the most mysterious place they could imagine. In Sweden, Urban Ranger translates to Suburban Hut Keeper. All of this tells us a good deal about the U.S.—where we read both city and wilderness as extraordinary and potentially public, while suburbia is a normative landscape.

The LA Urban Rangers offer distinct opinions about whether their work should be conceived as not only site-specific but also explicit to the U.S. For Daleiden, “the gestalt is rarely applicable” in other countries, but some

elements of the project can be exported. Emily Scott, who now lives and works in Switzerland, argues that “local knowledge, site-specific knowledge, takes a long time to accrue and accumulate.” She doesn’t imagine donning her Ranger hat as an artist-theorist abroad. “I’m really an Americanist, which I wasn’t fully aware of until I left the States. It’s a specific kind of expertise—at least my interests in the history of the National Parks Service and of notions of landscape in the US—that does not easily translate” (E. Scott, personal interview, September 8, 2011). Yet when Scott speaks of her current project, *Supply Lines*, she loops back to her work with the LA Urban Rangers. *Supply Lines* is a visual-research collaboration among a core group of artists and theorists (including the video essayist Ursula Biemann) spread across the globe and devoted to exploring human interactions with natural resources and the socio-spatial relations ensuing from them.<sup>19</sup> The *Supply Lines* platform eventually will be a web archive, which can be accessed by anyone—from students to government policymakers to the artists themselves, who might use the research others produce to deepen their own contributions. The global scale of this project differentiates it sharply from the local, low-tech, street-level performances of the LA Urban Rangers. Yet Scott finds the scalar extremes of “local” and “global” less interesting than what the projects have in common, which is—as I would phrase it—how they act in the world. She describes both as “intervening into top-down flows of information” and raising questions that “have no real end, or that become a jumping-off point for other people to continue their own investigations” (E. Scott, personal interview, September 8, 2011).

I think it would be a mistake to assume that the public anticipated by *Supply Lines* is necessarily larger than the public created by the LA Urban Rangers, whose delivery mechanism (the Ranger persona) enters into the channels of popular culture in a way that a more theoretically nuanced platform cannot. Scott acknowledges that some kinds of projects demand a level of discourse more readily associated with academia: “In order to write about certain kinds of practices, which are theoretically complex, the only way to do it is to write at the level of the work.” I make note of this scalar difference in implied publics not to critique either project, but to point out the tendency that I’ve seen in my own academic circles to judge the scale of a critical work in terms of what or whom it attempts to represent rather than who will be likely to receive it, read it, or be prompted by its concerns. Scott makes a similar call for “attentiveness to *where* geographical work happens” in an article touching on the *Malibu Public Beaches* project: “This project compels us to consider the destination of our labors, by asking: ‘Where will my work most effectively operate, especially in terms of the communities/publics I intend to engage?’” (“Undisciplined Geography” 56). For me, the questions “How does it act?” and “Whom does it activate?”, to use the LA Urban Rangers’ language, are questions of method and media—and really first questions in the effort to conceive the scale of our work and thought.



## CONCLUSION

Given how hard it is to find common ground in the U.S. these days, an art collective that generates temporary “commons” offers a rich model for both academic and political practice. I interviewed the four founders of the LA Urban Rangers because I felt they had something to teach me, as a North American academic and an environmental critic who sees scholarly work as sustainable insofar as it builds things, where “things” might mean intangibles such as social relationships or expressive styles. The LA Urban Rangers have been described as a project of “applied American Studies,” meaning, I suppose, that they are a critical and historical project that lives in performance, through specific sites and actors.<sup>20</sup> To an extent, American Studies is always applied, whether performed by artists or environmental critics. But accessibility haunts my own academic practice—for instance, how to write as a scholar for a larger public and to teach my graduate students to do the same. While I won’t insult art collectives or academics by suggesting that academics can or should be artists, I admire the ways in which the LA collectives that I’ve experienced collaborate, translate, and distribute their often acute reimaginations of the world.

My thinking between “academic” and “arts” practice makes up the primary transcultural dimension of this interview/chapter, and I thank the



*Figure 15.2* Los Angeles Urban Rangers, Critical Campout 2011, tent view, dawn.  
Credit: Stephanie LeMenager.



founders of the LA Urban Rangers for their generous participation. I conclude with a few of their ideas about academic-arts collaboration. “Our group wouldn’t be what it is without our academic backgrounds,” Jenny Price says flatly. “We bring a depth of experience with critical thinking in particular fields that you could not get without going to graduate school” (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). Sara Daleiden encourages “thoughtful experiments in merging language, exploring language. Activists, artists, and academics tend to have radically different language sets. Actually, the merging of those is potentially where power comes.” Price adds, “We [the LA Urban Rangers] are all about communication. And that’s ultimately what academia is supposed to be about, even though I think that often gets lost. It’s supposed to be about communication” (J. Price, personal interview, August 5, 2011). Of course, “communication” shares an etymological root with “commons” in the Latin *communis*, meaning “in common, public, general, not pretentious, shared by all or many.” When the pursuit of the deep contexts of social nature assumes a common tongue, there’s no telling what the scale of reimagination will be, or when it tips toward remaking.

## NOTES

1. I thank Emily Scott for directing me to the work of Sarah Kanouse.
2. Of the situationist practice of the *dérive* (“drift”), Guy Debord writes, “In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psycho-geographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.”
3. I owe some of my broader insights about the CLUI to Sarah Kanouse’s “Touring the Archive, Archiving the Tour: Image, Text, and Experience with the Center for Land Use Interpretation.”
4. For more information, visit “About LAPD” at the LAPD website: <http://www.lapovertydept.org/about-lapd/index.php>
5. In a discussion of the Urban Ranger persona, Emily Scott described a lecture that she gave at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where an audience member pointed to “hospitality” as a primary quality of the park ranger. Scott feels that “hospitality” best conveys the feeling that the LA Urban Rangers attempt to offer to their audiences.
6. Because of its efficient and even lyrical treatment of the multiple trajectories of the usage of “common” in a single concise entry, the *Online Etymology Dictionary* is cited here (Harper). For scholarly purposes, I suggest that the reader cross-reference this etymology with that of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which notes the disparate dates of usage of “common” as in “the common body of the people of any place” (c. 1300) and “common” as in “common land or estate” (c.1479), meaning “the undivided land belonging to the members of a local community as a whole. Hence, often, the patch of

unenclosed or 'waste' land which remains to represent that." See "common, n." in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

7. For a discussion of the historical inaccuracies of Hardin's influential article, see Susan Jane Buck Cox's "No Tragedy on the Commons."
8. See Edward Abbey's "Industrial Tourism and the National Parks" in *American Earth: Environmental Writing since Thoreau*.
9. LA Urban Ranger maps can be accessed at [www.laurbanrangers.org](http://www.laurbanrangers.org).
10. For a record of this and other gardenLAB installations and events, see Fritz Haeg's website: [http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden\\_main.html](http://www.fritzhaeg.com/garden_main.html).
11. Jenny Price described both the California Coastal Commission and the Coastal Conservancy "using our maps when they're having meetings and [having] people look" at the beach access points.
12. See the Center for Urban Pedagogy's mission statement, "What We Do": <http://welcometocup.org/>.
13. The term "social sculpture" was coined by the artist and politician Joseph Beuys, who uses it with a more explicit ideological valence than I convey here.
14. Kelly described the Ranger figure as complementary to the consensus building that she does in her professional life as an architect, saying "the Ranger persona itself plays really well with that, [as a] very democratic, accessible figure that's asking everyone what they think and inviting all kinds of viewpoints" (T. Kelly, personal interview, December 21, 2011).
15. For a classic example of the literary equivalent of the "slum tour," the "mysteries of the city" exposé, see George G. Foster's *New York by Gas-Light, and Other Urban Sketches*.
16. Jenny Price offered the Lesbian Rangers and the New York City Park Rangers—a methodologically "straight" group that leads hikes and campouts in urban parks—as examples of other collectives that utilize the Ranger persona ("The Los Angeles Urban Rangers Enact the Megalopolis!").
17. I want to note some suggestive points of congruence between Daleiden's notion of the commons in arts practice and certain movements within an elegant conference paper I had the pleasure to hear Professor Lauren Berlant offer in October 2011. See Lauren Berlant, "Sensing the Commons: This Connection of Everyone with Lungs."
18. Again, this online source offered the most compressed and therefore poetic rendering, although for scholarly purposes I would suggest cross-referencing it with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which breaks down the varied meanings of the term with more precise attention to usage dates, variants, and so on.
19. For more on *Supply Lines*, check out the "curatorial" link at <http://www.geobodies.org/>.
20. Jenny Price mentioned the "Applied American Studies" descriptor during her lecture at UC-Santa Barbara. See note 16.