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Final Report

My project seeks to understand the material and aesthetic transformations of nature-culture articulations in Punjab after colonial intervention. Focusing on the capture, transformation, control, and management of the Indus rivers, the project seeks to trace the co-constitutive relations between the rivers and the communities therein since the introduction and implementation of ‘modern’ irrigation infrastructure in the last quarter of nineteenth century. Combining archival and ethnographic research with literary and textual analyses, this project seeks to demonstrate that nature and the native are simultaneously captured and collected in colonial discourses and practices both materially and aesthetically. While I map the transformations wrought by the aestheticization of the nature-culture binary in the colonial context through critical readings of the literature produced by the New Poetry Movement under colonial patronage, I also trace the material transformation of rivers and materialization of a Cartesian idea of space in canal colony villages and towns through analysis of colonial documents and ethnographic research. This project thus synthesizes debates at the intersection of political ecology, ecocriticism, and environmental history of place.

In the summer of 2017, AIPS’ travel grant facilitated my pre-dissertation research work in Pakistan. The two main objectives of my preliminary research were to locate and familiarize myself with different archives in Lahore, and to select a possible site for future ethnographic fieldwork. I spent much of my time in Lahore in the Punjab Archives and it changed my project considerably. I discovered a wealth of data on the literary and education-related activities of colonial administrators such as Colonel Holroyd and G.W. Leitner, and the governmental correspondence on the literary services of the Anjuman-e-Punjab. These resources added a completely new perspective to my project. I hope to revisit the Punjab Archives in the coming year to dive deeper into these data and find support for my claim that material transformations in the canal colony villages had an aesthetic corollary in the work of the Anjuman-e-Punjab. To be able to delineate simultaneous and similar transformations in the aesthetic and material spheres will allow me to go beyond linguistic constructionism and make a case for an ongoing ontic transformation set in motion by colonial intervention. To achieve the second objective of finding a possible site or two for my ethnographic fieldwork, I visited four different villages in Okara and Sahiwal districts of Punjab and I plan on choosing two for my extended fieldwork. The visit also helped me rethink canal colony villages as places which instantiate the encounter between a Cartesian idea of space and modern colonial sociology on the one hand, and indigenous history and sociopolitical struggles on the other. By facilitating this opportunity to visit the archive and the potential ethnographic fieldwork sites, AIPS’ summer travel grant helped me revise and refashion my project in many fundamental and crucial ways. I hope to build on these findings and insights as I continue working on my project.