Sidney Harman Academy for Polymathic Study
Spring 2016 Student Retreat:
Narratives and Environments
April 15-17 on Catalina Island
Application due Friday, March 18, 2016

“Welcome, muchachas from Teocaltiche, in this class
we speak English refrito, English con sal y limon,
English thick as mango juice, English poured from
a clay jug, English tuned like a requinto from Uruapan,
English lighted by Oaxacan dawns, English spiked
with mescal from Mitla, English with a red cactus
flower blooming in its heart.” —Gina Valdes, English Con Salsa

In Gina Valdes’s English Con Salsa, we are immersed in a world of language learning: she is attempting to learn English as a Mexican-American without forgetting the language of her home, her cultural heritage. In the poem’s beautiful code-switching, Valdes assembles her Mexican and American identities. Within three stanzas, she collides two seemingly separate worlds, two distinct languages, two cultural narratives into one environment.

For many people in the twenty-first century, storytelling relies more and more on assemblage. With the proliferation of industry, technology, and mass media, people are able to connect with, and share stories with, more people than ever before. Sharing transnational heritages through fusion foods, social media movements, and artistic syncretisms, storytelling via assemblage has also changed how we think about our environments: where does storytelling take place, and of what places do stories tell?

Faced with imminent threats of global warming, increased poverty, class stratification, and ongoing attacks to basic human rights, how do we as global beings listen to and make sense of mass narratives of trauma, both here at home and elsewhere in the world? How do these narratives create, alter, or disrupt environments? How can an environment affect the narratives told? And how have the environments themselves changed—therefore creating their own narratives, their own histories?

Through a fundamentally polymathic optic, we will look at the stories people tell and the places in which they tell them—across discipline, sub-discipline, genre, field, and language. As Valdes closes her poem, she affirms that while indeed she learned to speak English, she will never forget to “hum a Mixtec chant that touches la tierra and the heavens.” It is this constellation of narratives, cultures, sciences, and environments that the second annual Polymathic Retreat, “Narratives and Environments,” hopes to explore and map out.
Please fill in this document or create a document of your own with the appropriate information and send in pdf or word doc format to Karin Huebner at khuebner@usc.edu and copy Maureen Lenker at lenker@usc.edu by Friday, March 18, 2016. More information about the retreat is available on our website at polymathic.usc.edu

Full Name:

Major(s):

Minor(s):

Expected Graduation:

1. Please list your academic and extracurricular involvement at USC. Briefly, how might you consider yourself to be polymathic in your pursuits?

2. This weekend-long conference will facilitate collaboration among students with diverse academic backgrounds. What unique perspective can you contribute to this collaborative venture? (300 words or fewer)

3. Think about an environment or community you occupy outside of USC. What area(s) of that environment do you wish you could change, and how would that change impact the community? (500 words or fewer)
4. What histories/narratives did you not learn before college that you wish you had learned about? (200 words or fewer)

5. Pick 1 of 4 Optional Questions

a. Imagine you had to draw a map of USC. What are the first three things you would choose as landmarks?

b. In which confined spaces do you feel free?

c. Recount the story of your freshman year in 6 words.

d. How has your journey (e.g. as a student, artist, chef, athlete, etc.) influenced/been influenced by a specific environment?

7. Is there anything you'd like to write about yourself that you haven't written, yet?

Thank you for your application! We will inform you of our decision by Friday, March 25th.