I, Gunnar Paulsen, am committed to collaborating with Professors David Craig and Michael Strelow during the summer of 2011, which they have proposed to spend studying various aspects of the Columbia River Estuary.

I bring to this study a unique set of interests and knowledge that supplements my professors’ and peers’. My contribution will build on a foundation of scholarship that I developed during the Spring 2010 semester in Professor Chasar’s course: Eng. 438 “Poetry of the Pacific Northwest.” This class afforded me the opportunity to survey a plentitude of literature and scholarship whose subject was the Northwest, and often the Columbia River specifically; as a result, I became particularly interested in the ongoing series of cultural conflicts waged over the river.

Within the literature examined, I noticed the salmon is often the axis upon which these conflicts whirl; I relish the idea of investigating this further. Despite being a farflung fish present throughout America, the salmon has become a unique figure in the landscape of the Pacific Northwest. It is imbued with tremendous, although opaque, meaning by all cultures in the region. It’s meaning has superseded economic value and moved into the realm of the symbolic. Drawing on my preliminary knowledge of the mythologies surrounding the fish and the cultures it has shaped, I will present a series of reflections in a final piece of creative nonfiction, illuminating the cultural importance of the salmon to the various groups that have laid claims to the land surrounding the Columbia River. This final work will potentially include supplementary poetry and photography. Given Professor Strelow’s specialization in creative nonfiction, he will be an invaluable resource with whom I can develop my writing skills in this arena.

The class mentioned above also provided me another truly unique opportunity: attending the 13th Annual Fisher Poet’s Gathering in Astoria, OR. There I observed the power that salmon had on a particular group, the fishing community. The salmon’s tragic mystique inspires a continually evolving body of literature from a diverse group that one does not typically imagine writing poetry. I spearheaded the initiative to commandeer the feature section of the Collegian in order to tell the Willamette community of our bawdy experience with the poets. I took part in interviewing the Fisher Poets, probing them for perspectives on their profession and its poetic extension. I also photographed our experiences, seven of which were published in the Collegian. These experiences will serve me well this summer, as I plan on practicing both for my final work.

Professor Craig, whose primary focus in the estuary is the Caspian Tern, has described the bird as “the most cosmopolitan bird in the world.” With this in mind, one can see the conflicts taking place between fishing interests and bird protectors as a struggle between local and global interests and values. Does protecting local interests necessarily forego acceptance of cosmopolitan values? Can a synthesis be reached between the two? And how does a sustainable ethics fit within these debates? These are all questions I will strive to answer during my collaboration with Professor Craig.
Vocationally, this project will present me the opportunity to study how people construct meaning from their surroundings. I am particularly interested in how people engage with their physical environment and how that engagement is sublimated into a dynamic, living mythology and to what end that construction is employed. I have developed this interest at Willamette, but have not had the opportunity to study it in depth. In terms of academics I believe this mode of inquiry blends Literature, Cultural Studies, and Geography. I plan on continuing my studies in Literature at the graduate level, the end goal of which is to see myself secure a professorship at an institute similar to Willamette U.

In preparation for this project I have enrolled in Professor Nadelson’s course “Creative Nonfiction” which is offered during the upcoming semester. I have also begun reading background materials: environmental-histories of the Columbia River, the Columbia River Estuary Atlas, and stylistic models of writing by creative nonfiction authors. Finally, I have conducted a preliminary investigation into living in Astoria this summer; the experiential learning I would gain living amidst my subject would be invaluable to this study.