Making Common Causes: Crises, Conflict, Creation, Conversations: Offerings from the Biennial ALECC Conference Queen’s University, Kingston 2016

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What holds us in common? How can we create common spaces, common worlds, common conversations? And what conflicts—productive or even necessary ones—might our aspirations towards a commons conceal? As we contemplate the changes that have occurred in the geopolitical sphere over the past few months, the idea of common interests and causes might at first seem more elusive and fraught than ever. Yet while political polarization is undoubtedly a powerful force in the early days of 2017, ever-present in our social media feeds, on our TV screens, and even around the dinner table, such polarization might indicate that the difficult environmental challenges in which we are tangled call now, more than ever, for collective action. Climate change, the state of the oceans, and declining biodiversity demand that we think “the commons” in new ways; such issues at the planetary scale are further textured by calls for more careful use and equitable distribution of resources at local and regional scales. We know that any interpolation of “humankind” must be carefully and conscientiously striated by questions of race, coloniality, gender, sexuality, economic status, ability, and age, among other factors. Some power plays have recently tried to divide the commons on these grounds; at other times, we bring such divisiveness upon ourselves, in our own inattention to these important differences. Yet we have also witnessed new forms of alliance among groups who are finding their common ground in opposition to despotism. In short, any commons we seek will not be amorphous or homogenous; the work of finding difference in common, or the commons in difference, is always our work to do.

In this special section of The Goose on the question of the commons, we deliberately invoke the plural of conversation. We understand the effort to make common causes as a process, rather than a “one and done” act. It is multifaceted and messy; it invites imagination and critique. Most importantly, it needs to cultivate the common ground whereupon these difficult conversations can be engaged.
At ALECC’s biennial gathering at Queen’s University in June 2016, participants came together to explore the possibilities of “making common causes” from a host of angles, yet all were anchored in an acknowledgement of the diverse more-than-human relationships that make up our common worlds. We asked questions about how far the idea of “the commons” could stretch, how it has been invoked as both a boon and challenge to the forces of colonialism, capitalism, and privatization, and how it might be valued without sentimentalizing relationships between humans and other-than-human agents. Over several days of panels, keynote addresses, creative interventions, and field trips, what emerged was the notion of the commons itself as a shifting idea, shaped by temporal and geographical location and embodied experience.

The following collection of short essays, authored by some of the gathering’s keynote speakers, explores specific aspects of making common causes. This selection opens with Pamela Banting’s “Landscape as Alibi,” in which she explores the challenges of developing a sense of “common cause” in contemporary Alberta, where the dramatic scenery of the land’s surface and sky draws attention away from industrial extraction going on below. Such challenges are exacerbated, in some cases, by the fact that the language common to leftist movements like environmentalism has been adopted (even co-opted) by industry. Banting argues that in order to combat the logic of extractivism, citizens need to develop a stronger sense of place that includes what lies beneath their feet. Following from Banting’s attention to a settler colonial imaginary of landscape that may extend only “about as deeply as a radish,” Tania Aguila-Way’s “How Do You Grow a Seed Commons?” invites us to think the commons through seeds and seed activism. First finding inspiration in Robert Kroetsch’s Seed Catalogue and how it connects the poet to farmers and gardeners who have also grown things out of this archive, Aguila-Way moves on to consider how seed politics are entwined with the politics of settler colonialism. To exemplify tensions between traditional seed practices between and some settler colonial understandings of conservation and property, Aguila-Way describes the ongoing dispute between cottagers in Pigeon Lake, Ontario, and James Whetung, an Anishinabeg wild rice farmer. Seeding a commons, she concludes, may demand changing settler understandings of private ownership. If how to seed a commons is the question that animates Aguila-Way’s offering, then artist Ron Benner’s “All That Has Value” continues to think about the commons through food. Benner’s creative work reminds us that many of the foods we consume as common parts of the European and North American diet, such as potatoes, corn, and tomatoes, tell complex stories of cultural and genetic exchange between continents. To know oneself, Benner proposes, one must also know those plants and food cultures that have deposited an “infinity of traces” in the contemporary diet. Benner leaves us with an important question: how will we work to ensure that the nourishment of life remains commonly diverse rather than singularly commodified?
Mick Smith takes a different tack on the question of commons, going back to the work of the most prominent Darwinist of his day, Ernst Haeckel. Despite Haeckel's association with the word "ecology," Smith suggests that Haeckel’s understandings of the communities he studied aren’t really ecological at all: rather than underscoring our interrelations with strange submarine creatures, for example, Haeckel's work promotes a naturalistic hierarchy modelled on his own preconceptions. Smith concludes with a reminder of the importance of diversity—including interpretive diversity—in ecological communities. Bringing us out of Smith’s focus on past interpretations, Adeline Johns-Putra’s “Making Common Cause with the Future” specifically asks us to reflect on the significance of “the future” in climate change discourse. Where the figure of the child is invoked as a common cause around which all who are concerned about the environment are invited to rally, Johns-Putra suggests that we need to engage in larger and more complicated conversations—about anthropocentrism, the politics of care, and the place of the present. This selection of short essays ends with “A Note on Common Ground,” wherein Peter C. van Wyck joins us from the Naikoon Peninsula of Graham Island, on the northeastern shore of Haida Gwaii. There, he sits on a log, reading a book of Haida myths by Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst. The next day, after constructing a spiral jetty “forgery” with his children in the intertidal space, a Haida man asks him if it is a string of life. In this story, van Wyck reminds us that commons can be built across generations, geographies, and cultures. Even while losing one’s way always remains a possibility, the commons can be a gift, sometimes arriving in strange and surprising ways.

As these diverse perspectives remind us, to remain open to the stretchiness of the commons is one of the strengths of ALECC and the community it is building. Out of that community can grow surprising new connections, insights about the value of difference, and places to meet on grounds we might not even have realized we shared. We hope this spirit of thinking-in-common is captured in the following pages and that you find new ideas with which to wrestle as we move into 2017. May it be an uncommonly good year.

JENNY KERBER, current president of ALECC, is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. She is the author of Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally, and researches and teaches in the areas of Canadian Literature, Border Studies, and Indigenous Literature.

ASTRIDA NEIMANIS, past president of ALECC, is Lecturer in Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney (Australia) and Associate Editor of Environmental Humanities. Her monograph Bodies of Water Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology was published in 2017.
From the infamous tar sands mines to horizontal hydraulic fracturing, coal-fired power plants, hydroelectric dams, and wind turbines, the technologies of energy extraction are everywhere in Alberta. However, rimmed as it is on its western flank by the scenic rolling foothills and the shining Rocky Mountains, with the picturesque parkland and unique badland formations replete with the dinosaur bones and geological mystique of the central region, not to mention the turquoise glacial Bow River that runs through downtown Calgary, Alberta is also one of the most dramatically scenic provinces of Canada. Indeed the scenery—from the picturesque to the sublime to the industrial sublime as represented by the photographs of Edward Burtynsky—is an important component of the infrastructure of Alberta. We gaze fondly upon the surface contours of “Big Sky Country” while underground, at least 415,000 kilometres of oil and natural gas pipelines criss-cross the land in all directions.

In Alberta, there is a primary tension between the aesthetic and the industrial, the seen and the unseen, the scenery and the “un-seenery,” the framed and the unframeable, the surface and the underground, the striking vista and the plethora of wild lives going on largely out of sight. In some senses, the physical beauty of many parts of Alberta obscures—even in plain sight—the industrial devastation: the land is punctuated, punctured, and pummeled by pipelines, pump jacks, fracking pads, compressor stations, and bitumen mining pits. The question is: how can one achieve any sort of common cause or consensus with respect to forestalling the worst effects of climate change in a place where the landscape is so good-looking, where many people earn their living directly or indirectly from energy production, the politics are extremely polarized, and, other than geologists and people whose land has been “fracked,” most of us know very little about what is going on underground?

The answer ought to be easy: there is no one alive who does not require clean air and water, food, seasonal rhythms that are in sync with the needs of plants and animals, weather that does not wrench the roofs off our dwellings or sluice out our basements, and a peaceful society. At times, however, it can be difficult to know where one, or where anyone, stands—literally. One day I was browsing the magazine section of a bookstore when I noticed one with a bold caption: Speaking Truth to Power. I reached for it. As I discovered, the cover photograph was of an oil industry apologist standing on a small grey rock in what I think was probably ocean, a not-so-subtle visual allusion to the “tidewater” to which industry is pushing to pipe bitumen from northern Alberta. Suddenly I had vertigo. The magazine was Alberta Oil Magazine; the caption was an appropriation of a left-wing slogan of resistance. I felt as if I too
were standing precariously on a small grey rock, about to tip over into lapping waves: I had a moment of ideological seasickness. In most contexts, “the underground” is associated with the radical, the subversive, the grassroots, the artists, writers, and thinkers who provide the energy of cultural transformation, or the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. But in the Alberta context, the underground is literally and figuratively the location of petrocapitalist extraction. When both the literal and the figurative undergrounds are appropriated by corporate capitalism, in what, if any, spatial, sociopolitical, or ideological dimensions can community, common cause, or even constructive contention be situated?

It was while I was reading another text—Andrew Nikiforuk’s book *Slick Water: Fracking and One Insider’s Stand Against the World’s Most Powerful Industry*, about Jessica Ernst’s legal battle with the Encana Corporation for their alleged contamination of the groundwater near Rosebud, Alberta, and with the Alberta Energy Regulator which permitted it—when I suddenly realized that, for all intents and purposes, the ground of my own imaginary was as compromised as Ernst’s well water. After reading in the first few chapters about the mechanics of fracking, geological layers, underground aquifers, and Ernst’s well, in a single moment I understood that my own earth imaginary up to that page had consisted of more or less just the top six inches of the earth, supplemented here and there by scenic panoramas, some of them marred by a fracking pad. What a perfect epiphany of settler (un)consciousness—to catch oneself thinking of land only to the depth of the farmable topsoil, not even as far down as the unseen infrastructure of water, sewage, gas, and electricity lines that make my own dwelling here possible or at least comfortable. Even though I have read widely about energy issues, I can see a gas straddle plant and I can almost see a frack pad from my house, and I am hyper-conscious that the country immediately north and northeast of town is riddled with them, I did not really possess a “lived” notion—as opposed to a wholly abstract one—of the underground. I had been living about as deeply as a radish. I had less understanding of soil and rock than a badger.

In contemporary settler culture, many of us lack a sense of place that includes the underground. We are not so different from the oil apologist balancing precariously on her miniscule rock island on the edge of the ocean. As art critic Lucy Lippard, who now lives in rural New Mexico, wryly observes in her book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*, “The subterranean economy escapes us, as we try to escape its effects on our worlds” (104). In order to collaborate on common causes—such as mitigating the potentially cataclysmic effects of climate change—we need a strong sense of community. But we cannot create a deeply lived sense of the commons or community without a sense of place that goes far beyond the nominal place-attachments associated with such limited notions as scenery and its recreational opportunities, the tensions of private property, and capitalist exploitation. Without a sense of place that includes the earth—the subterranean and the submarine, as well as the surface—we have difficulty conceiving of common causes and alternative visions of community and difficulty therefore in countering the ideology and
practices of extractivism. By radically strengthening our bioregional consciousness and connection to place, we could come to occupy more affective and imaginative space and proportionally less physical territory and fewer so-called resources. We need to metamorphose, and very quickly, into subjects who are curious about and embrace not just the view but the very elements and stuff of life both above and below the topsoil. After all, subjectivity is constituted not only via the discursive practices but also the infrastructure (or lack thereof) into which one is born. In addition to formal government apologies, historical redress, and ample sustained funding, the infrastructure of reconciliation must include a transformation of settler notions of the earth. To my way of thinking, true reconciliation hinges on learning, really learning with one’s whole being, to passionately love the earth under one’s feet. Though we tend to think of love as apolitical and loving the earth as an apolitical solution, it is only such if we think of it as part of the same restrictive package that includes private property, sexism, heterosexism, rationalism, denigration of the body, racism, and corporate capitalism.

If we fail to do so, what we think of as the scenery will no longer continue to function as a kind of alibi for extraction, but will instead begin to extract from us a very high toll indeed. In the words of climatologist Michael Mann, “Whether it’s unprecedented wildfires running rampant in the tar sands region of Canada, or monster hurricanes striking oil refineries in the Gulf of Mexico, even fossil fuel extraction is no longer safe from the aggravating impacts of climate change” (quoted in Magill).

Works Cited


**PAMELA BANTING** (Associate Professor, University of Calgary) founded and served as the inaugural president of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC). More recently, she edited the special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* on Canadian Literary Ecologies (2014). She is also the author of the essay on “Ecocriticism in Canada” in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (2016), as well as numerous other critical-theoretical articles. Her current research and teaching are in the areas of energy in literature / petrocultural studies, literature and culture in the Anthropocene, psychogeography, decolonization and sense of place, and animality.
How Do You Grow a Seed Commons?

From the prized flax seeds that fuel Caleb Gare’s obsession with the land in Martha Ostenso’s *Wild Geese* to the “Roundup Ready” canola seeds that spark the lawsuit at the heart of Annabel Soutar’s documentary play *Seeds*, seeds have long occupied a prominent place in the Canadian literary imagination. As units of dispersal that enable plant reproduction, seeds are frequently figured as symbols of creativity, regeneration, heredity, and cultivation. But, as the Canadian seed activist Devlin Kuyek notes, apart from fulfilling biological functions that are crucial to the preservation of plant species, seeds are also “profoundly social: they reflect and reproduce the cultural values and social interests of those who developed them” (3). The biocultural significance of seeds has become the subject of heated debate in recent years as a result of the growing spread of GMO seeds and gene-patenting regimes that limit farmers’ ability to save and share their own seeds. Vandana Shiva has suggested that this privatization of the seed constitutes a new phase in the enclosure of the commons (68), leading me to ask: what might literature, as a vehicle for thinking about the multilayered roles that seeds play within our cultural imaginaries, teach us about the relationship between seed saving and the preservation of the commons? And, to adapt one of the questions posed by the conveners of the “Making Common Causes” conference, what can literature teach us about the “conflicting interests and varying positions of power and privilege that shape how we view” this project?

To unpack these questions, I turn to a work of poetry that provides important insight into the sociocultural significance of seeds in the Canadian context: Robert Kroetsch’s *Seed Catalogue*. Much has been written about Kroetsch’s use of horticultural motifs in the poem,¹ but what interests me here is his use of an archival source—the eponymous seed catalogue—as a means of connecting the poet to the commons. Grappling with the question, “How do you grow a poet?” Kroetsch finds some tentative answers in the catalogue’s lyrical, if rather folksy, descriptions of its various seed offerings (23). The poem excerpts plant images, ruminations, and memories that become part of the poet’s personal archive, and these spring forth, years later, as he struggles to articulate his creative vision. The catalogue’s power as a source of creative inspiration stems, in large part, from its condition as a “shared text” that links its readers to a wider communal experience—a cultural, literary, and agricultural commons (Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* 8). Culturally, the catalogue initiates the poet into “the oral culture of the prairies,” making a lasting mark on his developing sense of language (Campbell 20). Literarily, it connects him to a vast reserve of seed-related stories, myths, and metaphors—perhaps most notably, to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, a motif that fascinates him “because it invites a variety of retellings that range from ancient myth to child’s

¹ Kerber et al.: Making Common Causes: Crises, Conflict, Creation, Conversations Published by / Publié par Scholars Commons @ Laurier, 2017
riddle” (Campbell 25). But, as Laurie Ricou has noted, Kroetsch’s poem is just as interested in the “sensory definiteness” of the seed catalogue as it is in its metaphorical associations (115). Indeed, by emphasizing the material specificity of its archival source, *Seed Catalogue* connects the poet to a literal community of farmers and home gardeners who have leafed through this “shared text” and used its offerings to seed the prairie soil.

But even as it embodies the poet’s connection to a larger commons, Kroetsch’s seed catalogue is also steeped in a settler culture that conflates the work of seed saving with the “cultivation of wilderness into private lands” (Coleman 112). The poet evokes this paradox when, reflecting on his parents’ painstaking efforts to delineate the boundaries of the family farm, he muses: “[w]e give form to this land by running a series of posts and three strands of barbed wire around a ¼ section” (24). Contrary to their basic function as units of dispersal, then, the seeds featured in Kroetsch’s catalogue are destined to be cultivated in a “home place” with strictly defined coordinates (8). The sweet peas that adorn the front porch belie this fixity by “climbing” through the garden in rhizomatic patterns, but they are kept in check by a carefully laid enclosure of “staked chicken wire” and “binder twine” (38).

Thus, in keeping with the poet’s description of his “home place” as a locus of “double hook[ed]” memories, the sweet peas recall his mother’s “tired hands” while also evoking a settler colonial ethos that hinges on the “ownership and improvement of land” (Kroetsch 31, 38; Coleman 112).

As historian Lorenzo Veracini notes, this ethos of “settler colonial enclosure” continues to animate processes of land acquisition to the present day (64). What interests me here, however, is the way in which this ethos can sometimes be reinforced by community-based efforts to restore the seed commons. In Canada, these efforts are coordinated by Seeds of Diversity, a grassroots organization that maintains a seed library of “2300 regionally-adapted and rare seed varieties” and enables farmers and backyard gardeners to “grow, maintain, and disseminate these varieties through [an] annual seed exchange project” (“Objectives”; “Library”). This initiative has done important work towards reviving the farmer-to-farmer seed-sharing networks that are necessary to the preservation of seed security. However, its reliance on a volunteer force made up primarily of settler farmers and backyard gardeners tacitly reinforces a settler colonial conflation between seed saving and the cultivation of private property, thereby raising complicated questions about the politics of seed conservation in Canada—among them, what happens when efforts to preserve an endangered seed clash with settler colonial understandings of seed conservation and/or settler colonial understandings of private property?

One controversy that brings these tensions into relief is the ongoing dispute between cottagers in Pigeon Lake, Ontario, and James Whetung, an Anishinabeg wild rice farmer who has been harvesting wild rice in the area for twenty-five years (Kapyrka n.pag.) Since 2014, the cottagers
have been voicing concerns about the effects that Whetung’s ricing operation is having on the Pigeon Lake waterfront. They insist that they support Whetung’s treaty right to harvest wild rice, but take issue with his efforts to “revive the rice beds” in the area by using mechanical harvesting methods and re-seeding the lake after every harvest (Sachgau n.pag.). The residents contend that these practices have caused the rice to spread at an unprecedented rate, affecting their property values and restricting their own use of the waterfront (Sachgau n.pag.). As some commentators have noted, however, these claims highlight a lack of understanding of the “constitutional treaty rights that the Williams Treaty First Nations hold with regards to harvesting,” as well as a “philosophical difference” between the residents’ view of the lake as a place for “recreational enjoyment” and the Anishinabeg view of the lake “as a spiritual being, as sustenance, as nationhood and governance” (Kapyrka n.pag.; McKenzie qtd. in Sachgau n.pag.) Placed in the context of current debates around heritage seed conservation in Canada, this dispute also highlights the need to re-think seed conservation discourses that hinge on settler understandings of private property, and thus conceptualize seed saving in ways that can marginalize or even erase agricultural practices that cannot be rooted to privately owned plots of land.

Through its open-ended connection to waterways that traverse property lines and colonially imposed borders, wild rice cultivation disrupts the ethos of enclosure that underpins settler colonial discourses about seed preservation, suggesting interesting directions for re-thinking the settler roots of mainstream seed activism. What might happen to our understanding of seed sharing and seed activism if, instead of theorizing these activities in connection to the cultivation of private land, we theorize them in connection to communally maintained bodies of water? If “thinking with water” can help us “challenge land-based preconceptions of fixity” and forge more “relational ways of knowing,” as Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis have suggested (9, 11), might thinking about seed sharing in relation to wild rice farming help grow a seed commons that is less rooted in settler culture and more committed to protecting Indigenous peoples’ right to seed and food sovereignty?

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1 See, for instance, Wanda Campbell’s “Strange Plantings: Robert Kroetsch’s Seed Catalogue” and Laurie Ricou’s “Prairie Poetry and Metaphors of Plain/s Space.”

Works Cited


TANIA AGUILA-WAY completed a doctorate in Canadian literature at the University of Ottawa and is currently a visiting scholar and SSHRC postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University. Her dissertation focused on the treatment of scientific epistemology in diasporic Canadian literature, and her current research focuses on the representation of seed ecologies and seed sovereignty activism in contemporary North American literature and art. Tania's work has appeared in Social Text, Canadian Literature, and ISLE.
We eat the plants and the plants eat us.

In my recent publication *Three Questions* (2016), I make reference to the following statement by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*: “The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (324). Yet as Edward Said points out in the introduction to *Orientalism*, the English translators inexplicably leave out the conclusion of this statement as it is presented in Gramsci’s Italian text, which concludes: “therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory” (Said 25).

As an artist, I have been compiling an inventory of Native American economic plants for over forty years. This inventory consists of plant names, plant materials, books, seed catalogues, photographs, and related ephemera that acknowledge the contributions Native American farmers have made to the food cultures of the world.

*All That Has Value*, 1993–1995 is a mixed media photographic/garden installation commissioned by Harbourfront Centre, Toronto. I began to compile the “unclassified” inventory of native North and South American economic plants in 1979–1980 while I was living and working in Peru. Embedded in the list of plant names on the billboard is one of the reference books I consulted, *Dictionary of Economic Plants*, which was written by J.C. Th. Uphof, the Economic Botanist to the Board of Economic Warfare in Washington, D.C.
What is “classified” on the billboard is the end of the title statement which began with “All that has value . . . was then counted as nothing.” This quotation is from a Mexican who witnessed the European conquest of the Aztecs and their capital of Tenochtitlan (modern-day Mexico City) in 1519. The counting of what was of value was being done by the European invaders.

The US Patent #2,368,348 on top of the photograph of the shopping cart/supermarket references the patent that was granted to the General Electric Corporation in 1980 for a genetically modified oil-eating bacteria. Patents had gone beyond the world of plants and into other life forms for the first time.

The photograph in *All That Has Value* was taken in 1987. The image is one of several of the interior of the largest supermarket in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, photographed from within a shopping cart. These images were part of a photographic/garden installation, *American Cloisonné*, which was created within the Mendel Art Gallery's plant conservatory in 1988.

*American Cloisonné* examined the relationships between the architecture of plant conservatories, greenhouses, shopping malls, supermarkets, and prisons. This work included images taken of the Prince Albert Federal Penitentiary, where at that time, seventy-five percent of the prison population were First Nations individuals and the food they were growing—tomatoes, zucchini, and potatoes—was native to the Americas. They were also constructing picnic tables for the parks operated by the federal and provincial governments. The list of economic plants native to the Americas was installed on the surface of the concrete perimeter of the conservatory.
The images of the supermarket in Saskatoon were subsequently used in the installation *The Commodification of Life*, 1995–1996. This work is a patent history of life forms beginning with the hybrid rose in 1930 when US President Hoover signed into law the Townsend-Purnell Act. This act allowed for the patenting of “asexually produced plants” and “by any other method than by seed” and “other than a tuber-propagated plant.”

By the late 1930s, former US Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace would prioritize F1 hybrid corn seed usage—a forerunner of genetically modified corn seed.

In 1988, the US Patent and Trademark Office granted a patent to Harvard University on a transgenic, nonhuman mammal—the onco mouse. Transgenic rats and pigs were to follow the mouse into patent history. In 1996, Ron Brown, a US Secretary of Commerce, three doctors from the US National Institute of Health, and a US anthropologist who had been studying the isolated tribal community applied for a patent on a man from Papua New Guinea. In 1996 the commodification of life was almost complete. At the time, I was having a hard time obtaining a photograph of Ron Brown, so I used an image of myself as the patented human.

The potato would like to intervene at this point and explain to everyone that it is not to blame for the “Irish Potato Famine.” Neither were the Irish. The potato is native to Peru and has been farmed in the Andes for thousands of years. There are more than two thousand varieties. Yet when the potato arrived in Ireland in the seventeenth century, only a few varieties were grown, making it vulnerable to disease. Between 1845 and 1852, over a million Irish people died and another million emigrated. The potato plant, on which...
landless peasants depended for sustenance, had been infested with a parasitic algae originating from the slopes of the Toluca volcano in Mexico. Yet there was enough food being produced in Ireland at the time of the famine to feed everyone. The real problem was British control over the distribution of the produce farmed in Ireland.

*Cuitlacoche: Your Disease Our Delicacy, 2012* is a photographic/garden installation on the grounds of Hart House, University of Toronto. The images of cuitlacoche, or corn smut, were photographed in 2006. These corn plants were growing in an earlier photographic/garden installation in London, Ontario. In Mexican cuisine, huitlacoche or corn mushroom is prepared with onions and chillies as a filling for tacos. European-American farmers consider it a disease and call it corn smut. Huitlacoche can be found on any part of the corn plant, but the best-tasting huitlacoche is found on the corncob itself, where it is embedded in the corn’s kernels. It requires an observant farmer to gather it.

Travel has always been an important part of my work. My most recent trip was to Palestine, where I participated in a conference called “Art and Resistance” at Dar al-Kalima University, Bethlehem. Native American plants were growing everywhere. Cacti, native to the Americas, grow in Palestinian villages and on the balconies of buildings. Bougainvillea, native to Brazil, can be found in the Bethlehem Botanical Garden and in the Palestinian refugee camps dating from 1948, when the state of Israel was founded. From Beit Jala, I photographed an old railway line, which today only Israelis can use. On the Palestinian

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*Figure 1*

Cacti, Beit Jala, Palestine, May 2016. (Photo credit: Ron Benner)

*Figure 2*

Hillside, West of Beit Jala, Palestine, May 2016. (Photo credit: Ron Benner)

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https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss2/24
side of the terraced landscape, almonds, pomegranates, and olive trees grow alongside wild oregano and other wild plants. On the Israeli side of the tracks, the hills are planted with a single type of European pine tree. When I returned home in late May of 2016, our backyard was covered with a profusion of white flowers—the star of Bethlehem. A Field Guide to Ontario Wildflowers describes the star of Bethlehem as an alien. It is native to the lands along the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Bouganvillea, Ayda Refugee Camp, Bethlehem, Palestine, May 2016. (Photo credit: Ron Benner)

Star of Bethlehem, London Ontario, Canada. May 2016. (Photo Credit: Rob Benner)

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**RON BENNER** is an internationally recognized artist, gardener, and activist based in London, Ontario. Drawing on his extensive travels and polymath learning, his unique multimedia gardening art practice is notably dedicated to the ecology and political economy of the movement of plants, food, farming, and industrial agriculture on local and global scales. These installations and their concerns are explored in his book, *Gardens of a Colonial Present* (Museum London, 2008). His works are in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Toronto, the University of Western Ontario, Museum London, the Canada Council Art Bank, and the Casa de Las Americas in Havana, Cuba.
Ernst Haeckel spent his life studying extraordinary marine creatures, attempting to make them comprehensible; revealing, and reveling in, their beauty rather than their monstrosity; believing that beneath surface appearances there was indeed an idea in them and uniting them, one that could even explain their hidden “designs” without recourse to any supernatural designer. That idea was, of course, evolution, which for Haeckel was the most prominent and popular Darwinist of his day. He also, as many know, coined the term ecology.

But, we might ask, what kind of sense did Haeckel make of the marine invertebrates he researched, classified, and illustrated? To what extent did Haeckel’s scientific work facilitate, or perhaps elide, an understanding of how important the truly strange lives, experiences, and interrelations of these unfamiliar beings are in constituting their submarine ecological communities? And what, if anything, do they actually have in common with us?

Haeckel cleaved to naturalistic, even mechanistic explanations as an integral aspect of his Monist philosophy. For Haeckel, “scientific research captures gradually the entire province of human intellectual effort,” and “all true ‘science’ is basically natural science” (Haeckel in Nolt, 268). Decades before E. O. Wilson’s Sociobiology, Haeckel claimed that sociology “should be treated as a natural science, as a branch of physiology” (Kristallseelen 127). Monism was, says Todd Weir, “a totalizing philosophy bent on eradicating the boundaries between other forms of knowledge in the name of science” (8).1 HEREHaeckel’s Monism, like Wilson’s scientific materialism, was not simply a matter of scientific and evolutionary advocacy but of the presentation of a single unifying worldview, a Weltanschauung, providing its adherents with a comprehensive explanatory system within which literally everything, including ethics and politics, could be interpretatively framed. It offered, as Weir notes, a comprehensive promise of scientific “redemption” (13).
Like many, I am skeptical of such promises, even (or perhaps especially) where they claim to be naturalistic. Yet scientific ecology does, unfortunately, tend to be understood naturalistically. “Ecologists,” say Keller and Golley, “as philosophical naturalists, agree that all things are discoverable by the same methods and are describable in the same language” (12). This is, they hasten to add, a methodological, not a metaphysical claim, because ecologists may “disagree on the ultimate constitution of nature itself” (12). Such a distinction is, perhaps, not so easily made as they think, but might Haeckel and Wilson exemplify their point? For, despite his rigorous scientific naturalism, Haeckel’s overwhelming desire was to separate his Monism metaphysically from any form of materialism that denies “the existence of spirit, and dissolves the world into a heap of dead atoms” (The Riddle 16-17). Indeed Haeckel’s view was explicitly pantheistic. He considered his work to be following in the footsteps of Spinoza and Goethe, whereby “[m]atter, or infinitely extended substance, and Spirit (or energy), or sensitive and thinking substance, are the two fundamental attributes, or principal properties, of the all-embracing divine essence of the world, the universal substance” (The Riddle 17). This meant, as the title of his last book, Crystal Souls (Kristallseelen) suggests, that this “psychic” attribute is present in inorganic as well as organic matter. He “speculated that the atom itself may have a rudimentary form of sensation and will, of feeling (aesthesis) and inclination (tropesis)” (Degrood, 1965: 72-3).

Every shade of inclination, from complete indifference to the fiercest passion, is exemplified in the chemical relation of the various elements towards each other, just as we find in the psychology of man, and especially in the life of the sexes (Haeckel, 1929: 183-4).

It is interesting to speculate whether what we might refer to as Haeckel’s “elective affinities” might have offered a pre-genetic but still naturalistic account of something akin to E. O. Wilson’s notion of “biophilia / biophobia,” the experiences of sometimes feeling drawn into communication, even “communion” with a nature perhaps not so coldly indifferent to us after all—sometimes feeling alienated, even repulsed, by a natural world as extraordinary, strange, and incomprehensible, as Jefferies’ epigraph (above) suggests.

Jefferies—a key influence on writers including Henry Williamson and Edward Thomas—also wrote about just such moments of communion, especially with the nature of his own, much more familiar, Wiltshire countryside. Take, for example, his description of an ecstatic immersion in a world that, he felt, actively responded to and amplified his presence, as he lay on the grass of the Iron Age fort of Liddington Castle:

I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth’s firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I
saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race . . . I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition. (4-5)

Not surprisingly, if Jefferies has any reputation today, it is certainly as something of a nature mystic. But, perhaps, the gulf between Haeckel’s scientific Monism and nature mysticism is not actually that great. Scientific materialists might readily agree. But, I think that the ecological, ethical, and political problems with Haeckel’s Monism are more closely connected with the monolithic naturalism it shares with scientific materialism than a pantheism that is consonant, though not identical, with many different cultural traditions. This pantheism was also shared with many of Haeckel’s scientific contemporaries including the physicist John Tyndall and, of course, environmentalists like John Muir.

I would go further: a monolithic naturalism is mistaken; there are many ways to discover and describe the world even if we accept substance monism. As John Dupré puts it, we might agree that,

there is no stuff but physical stuff . . . [but] I take it to be equally important to not let this agreement conceal the fundamental diversity of the kinds of things which are composed of stuff. This metaphysical pluralism is closely connected . . . with an epistemological or methodological pluralism: there is no unique method for investigating all the many different kinds of things there are in the world . . . science is as diverse as the world it studies. (6)

The diversity of a science like ecology is, of course, also dependent on the descriptive terms it borrows from non-scientific languages. Ecology is replete with terms like competition, division of labour, cooperation, mutualism, and, of course, community itself; adopted, adapted, (mis)appropriated from, and in constant exchange with their varied and changing meanings in politics, economics, sociology, and so on.

To recognize these influences and then still choose to describe the world in terms of ecological communities rather than, say, “resilient” ecosystems/social systems is not just a slip in scientific terminology; it is an ethical and political act. To espouse naturalism, on the other hand, is an anti-political act; it harbours a discursive claim to ecological and political sovereignty (Smith, 2011); it claims that Science, with a capital S, as the world’s overseer, should decide what really “matters.” But community (ecological and/or human), like knowledge, is not something that exists on one plane only, held together by some essential or overarching ordering principle. Indeed, a community can often be created amongst those who have little or nothing “in
common” (Lingis, 1994), who barely “know” each other, and ecological communities epitomize this diversity of beings and relations, experiences, and understandings—sometimes shockingly so. A community can be interpreted in many ways, from many perspectives.

Let me return to Haeckel to illustrate both the importance of recognizing interpretative diversity and the dangers of naturalism. For Haeckel combined “the pure, unequivocal monism of Spinoza” (The Riddle 17) with Darwinism, not to elucidate ecology, but to propose a progressive evolutionary “psychic ancestral tree . . . of innumerable gradations of . . . mental activity . . . a long scale of psychic development which runs unbroken from the lowest, unicellular forms of life up to the mammals, and to man at their head” (The Riddle 84, my emphasis). Haeckel was, after all, also a pioneer in the arboreal depiction of evolution. The idea that unifies nature’s disparate and strange forms was that of the organism’s specific evolutionary form in terms of its developmental expression of its ancestral phylogeny. The bio-political implications of this model are that all other beings are classified as humanity’s “experientially” poor relations on this psychic evolutionary tree, where humans (and, for Haeckel, also certain specific human “races”) are deemed psychically superior to (more evolved than) all other beings. I offer no prizes for guessing the sex, “race,” and nationality of the creature (Haeckel) perched at the top of the tree. Were this to be the only description of the world discovered by science we would be in real ethical, political, and ecological trouble. To recognize these influences and then still choose to describe the world in terms of ecological communities rather than, say, “resilient” ecosystems/social systems is not just a slip in scientific terminology; it is an ethical and political act.

Ironically, despite his neologism ecology and his position as the foremost scientific promoter of monistic panpsychism, Haeckel’s biology actually has little to say about issues of ecological community in terms of aesthesis (feelings) or tropesis (inclinations). Neither Haeckel’s science nor his art is at all concerned with discovering or depicting the psychic worlds of the organisms in their ecological relations. Indeed, the living aspects and relations of individual organisms are largely subsumed under organizational symmetries, both in terms of their bodily form and in terms of their ornamental arrangement on the page. For example, in “nearly all the portrayals of radiolarians, only the skeletons of these creatures are portrayed” because these are what matter in a taxonomic sense, and this is where symmetries and patterns are most obvious (Breidbach 11). Haeckel’s focus is on their formal “structural peculiarities” in relation to each other. Ecology is almost entirely absent here. As Breidbach notes, the “aspect of the animal’s relation to its particular environment does not appear to have been of interest” (11).

How different Haeckel’s view of the world could have been if he had focused on the ecological implications of the aesthetic and tropic attributes of beings and matter rather than on imposing a naturalistic hierarchy modelled on his own preconceptions. If only he had attended to the dangers of subjecting everything to an overly familiar order of things.
With the benefit of hindsight we might still try to go ecologically beyond Haeckel and we do not have to be pantheists to do this. We might still consider ourselves interpretative participants in phenomenologically, semiotically, and materially constituted communities composed of beings that express themselves and touch upon (make sense to) each other in many different ways. We might try to attend to the myriad “interpretative” relations that together compose any ecological community. We might find ourselves inhabiting ecosemiotic (Hoffmeyer; Siewers) places in anarchic regimes of diverse beings, relations, things, feelings, and tropisms, regimes composed of very different, sometimes entirely alien, sensibilities and sensitivities.

Few would now agree with Haeckel that “pantheism is the world-system of the modern scientist” (The Riddle 236), but the idea that these strange, diverse beings are all engaged in creative forms of ecological hermeneutics might still come as a shock to our anthropocentrically esteemed brains.

1 Indeed, Weir explicitly recognizes Wilson and Haeckel’s similarities, suggesting that “recent avowals of a new monism in the sciences have been made by the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson and the philosopher of biology Michael Ruse” (32 fn.5).

2 Jeffries was author of a post-apocalyptic novel, After London, where nature has overrun every sign of civilization; children’s books where animals speak (Wood Magic: A Fable); and numerous popular articles on English country life, collected, for example, in the posthumously published Field and Hedgerow. His most expressive book, albeit “a failure on publication” (Looker in Jefferies, 1948: 139), remains The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography. Here, Jefferies muses on his relation to the natural world in ways that are both fascinating and revealing, for despite the often exquisite detail in his descriptions of living things in his works, nature, as such, remains, at the last, alien and “incomprehensible” to him.

3 We should note that referring to ecological communities as eco-systems would not actually de-politicize the science, since as most sociologists contend, systems theory is not a neutral, objective, meta-language but a particular and partial way of framing understandings with its own cultural and technical debts and ethico-political consequences.

4 Which is not to say, as Daniel Gasman claims, that Haeckel’s Monism paved the way for National Socialism. Both Haeckel’s work and the Monist League, which promoted it, were banned by the Nazis. For a detailed analysis of Gasman’s argument see Smith, In Touch With Life, forthcoming.

5 The resulting pictures of “ideal” types have sometimes been criticized for their lack of naturalism in a different sense, but this again misunderstands their exemplary purpose and the way that these specific idea(l)s are linked to Haeckel’s scientific/philosophical worldview.

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Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World (U Minnesota P, 2011) and Emotion, Place and Culture (Ashgate, 2009), co-edited with Joyce Davidson, Laura Cameron, and Liz Bondi.
I speak of the life of a man who knows that the world is not given by his fathers, but borrowed from his children; who has undertaken to cherish it and do it no damage, not because he is duty-bound, but because he loves the world and loves his children.

Wendell Berry, *The Unforeseen Wilderness*

When Wendell Berry wrote these words in 1971, his immediate aim was to protect the Red River Gorge in his beloved Kentucky, but his formulation of a world borrowed from our children has proved astonishingly enduring. In the decades that have followed, this statement has been attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Chief Seattle, John James Audubon, and David Brower, among others; it has appeared uncredited in reports from the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Wildlife Fund; and it has been identified in newspapers as an Amish proverb and on bookmarks as a Native American saying (O’Toole).

This aphorism has been so willingly and wishfully attributed to a range of wise and venerable sources because it strikes a resonant chord, one that has only deepened in a time of climate change. The idea that our relationship with the biosphere is also a matter of posterity is a powerful one. It places us within a vast temporal and spatial commons, simplifying a web of concerns for the planet and its species into a single strand of time. It explicitly calls on us to steward the environment for a vastly distant future, while reminding us of our debt to those in the past. Most importantly, it brings those future generations into the immediate purview of parental love. The call to stewardship seems to trail off into the reaches of time, but the synecdochic modelling of future generations on our offspring replaces the terror of sublime infinity with the intimacy of parental caring, sheltering, and nurturing.

Little wonder, then, that climate change discourse repeatedly ventriloquizes the child, from Al Gore’s warning at the end of *An Inconvenient Truth* that “Future generations may well have
occasion to ask themselves, ‘What were our parents thinking? Why didn’t they wake up when they had a chance?’” to climate scientist James Hansen’s commitment to fight global warming on behalf of his grandchildren, photographs of whom appear in the pages of his book, Storms of My Grandchildren.

My concern in this essay, however, is less with how to think ourselves into an intergenerational commons and more with why we often do so under the aegis of parenthood. The place of the child in contemporary climate change discourse brings to mind Emmanuel Levinas’s proposition that our response to the Other is inseparable from our response to faces: “You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them” (85). In a time of climate change crisis, the face of the child is the Other to whom we may direct our ethical acts. Of course, this also evokes Lee Edelman’s now notorious critique of what he terms “reproductive futurism” (2)—the equation of the future with posterity and the emphasis on parenthood that accompanies it. According to Edelman, the child beguiles the subject (Edelman focuses particularly on the queer subject) into both assuming a parental posture that is inherently heterosexist and investing in a political hegemony that serves higher socioeconomic and political interests. While I have little truck with Edelman’s more nihilistic pronouncements (most notably, the encouragement of an essentialist and anti-relational queer politics), his assessment of a profound disingenuousness at the heart of cultural images of children is one way to understand the parental obsessions that underlie environmentalist constructions of posterity.

The figure of the child masks a complex of potentially contradictory environmentalist positions. For one thing, the invocation of posterity is a controversially anthropocentric stance, predating the value of the nonhuman environment of the present on the needs of the humans of the future. For another, dangers abound in taking environmentalist ethics of care for granted, for care dynamics so often conceal power dynamics (Tronto 170-171; Cuomo 126-130; Sandilands 173-173). Then (and we hardly need Edelman to remind us), a host of fraught identity politics lies behind our invocations of the child (Seymour vii-viii; Sturgeon 120-146). Finally, even if we assume the primacy of the environmentalist posterity argument, the needs of the future are not easy to weigh against the rights of the present. Even Rawlsian theories of justice to future generations have failed to account for the value to the present of meeting our obligations to the future, beyond recourse to notions of parental care. John Rawls’ seminal Theory of Justice refuses to discuss in detail the motivations behind our intergenerational obligations, and, in later work, Rawls simply ascribes the present generation’s concern for the future to an unspecified “motivational assumption” (Justice as Fairness 128-129). Tellingly, the closest Rawls comes to providing a reason for this motivation is to point to an interest in the welfare of one’s children and one’s children’s children, unwittingly replacing the “mutually disinterested” positions of his contract model with the ideal of parental love (Justice as Fairness 292; Heyd 175).
The emotional appeal of the figure of the child is not that it answers such questions but that it allows us to bypass them. The seemingly intractable questions of what and how to provide for the future mean that a constellation of anxieties surround the idea of climate change. Perhaps, unable to think our way through this dilemma, we respond with something like a collective angst. The child, then, both conceals all the knotty intractability of environmentalist concern and soothes the anxieties that ensue by placing them within the rather comforting frame of affection, love, and responsibility. If the poster child of the intergenerational commons is, indeed, the child, perhaps it is time to ask just what is at stake in the rise of this particular type of charismatic megafauna.

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On the Naikoon Peninsula of Graham Island, on the northeastern shore of Haida Gwaii—that is, the islands of the people—just a couple of kilometers from where the gravel road ends and spills onto the expanse of beach, I am sitting on a log.

Reading. Facing north.

From here I can see two landmarks that situate me in the region of coastal northern British Columbia. The first is Alaska. The forty-ninth state, known as Aláxsxaq to those who knew more, the Aleut. The name translates as the object toward which the action of the sea is directed—good name, that (Ransom 51). Questionable toponym.

Anyway, through the squint of cloud and fog—and today, as it happens, even without my binoculars—there it is. Or there they are. The two southernmost points of the largest state in the nation: Prince of Wales Island and Dall Island. I am told that Russia didn’t want them, but
from where I sit, they look like two miniature Toni Onley watercolors, buoyant, perfect, at the very edge of the sea.

But there is another thing that captures my imagination. Rose Spit, as it is called by some—it was named after a George Rose in 1788, nearly a century before smallpox did its grim work—but it is also known as House Point, and in Haida, Nai-kun (Lillard 83). The village there long ago abandoned, it is a very long and thin strip of land that juts out into the vastness of the ocean, east of Tow Hill (Tao Hill), at the very end of North Beach, separating Dixon Entrance and Hecate Strait.

Sitting there, I was reading a book of Haida myths by Bill Reid and Robert Bringhurst. It seems that the Raven in his “unquenchable itch to meddle and provoke things, to play tricks on the world and its creatures” was bored (Reid and Bringhurst 33). Walking along this very beach at Rose Spit, he had heard noises coming from within a large clam. Thinking this an interesting turn of events—promising even, some playthings perhaps—Raven looked inside.

He saw that “the shell was full of little creatures cowering in terror of his enormous shadow” (36). So the Raven “leaned his great head close to the shell, and with the smooth trickster’s tongue, that had got him into and out of so many misadventures during his troubled and troublesome existence, he coaxed and cajoled and coerced the little creatures to come out and play in his wonderful, shiny, new world” (34). Odd little creatures they were, “naked except for the long black hair on their round, flat-featured heads,” they “staggered to their feet and headed slowly down the beach, followed by the raucous laughter of the Raven echoing all the way to the great island to the north which we now call Prince of Wales” (36).

As this myth tells it, these small creatures were the first humans—the first Haida. “No timid shell-dwellers these, but children of the wild coast, born between the sea and land, challenging the strength of the stormy North Pacific and wrestling from it a rich livelihood” (36-37). As I sit on the log, a bit bewildered, this book on my lap, I try to comprehend something of this. What does it mean that this place I am at is the same place where the very first humans appeared?

Later in the day, I relate this story and surprising fact to my children.

“Is that really true?” they ask.

Of course it is. Yes!

The next day, having almost finished a fifty-foot model of Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty on the tide flats with two of my kids, I was stopped by a Haida man as I walked up to my tent to get a camera to make a photograph of our hundred and forty-eight stone forgery.
“Is that the string of life?” he asked.

I had no idea how to answer this question, so I said No, I don’t think so. It was just a kind of homage to a famous earthwork sculpture that I loved and had been telling my kids about. As Smithson described it, as we follow the spiral, we “follow our way back to our origins,” so it seemed a perfect intertidal family activity (113). I told him that we had carefully laid it out on the beach earlier that morning and then set about carrying big round stones from the upper beach, placing them on the long spiral line we had drawn in the sand. And when we finished, we would sit and wait to see what the incoming tide might make of it. The real one, the real Spiral Jetty, I told him, still juts out into the Great Salt Lake near Rozel Point in the state of Utah.

So what is this string of life? I ask him.

The string of life, he tells me, comes from one of his people’s stories. It tells of a hunter who, on a hunting trip, had strayed very far from home. He discovered that he had become lost and soon had used up all the tricks he knew to find his way home. The thing was that he was too far from home, so he had become really lost and could never again find his way back. As he explained it to me, the string of life is about maintaining connections with home and community, with the place where you belong. These things keep you alive, he said, they tie us all together. And there are many, many ways that one can become too far away. To become lost. And if you really go too far, the string breaks. And then you are really adrift.

“Oh, okay,” he said. And, turning to walk away, he looked out again at our spiral jetty. “I think that sure looks like the string of life to me.”

I walked to get my camera, thinking, such gifts.

Masset, BC
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