Guest Editorial

Dark Matters: Turning Toward the Untouched, the Unheard, and the Unseen in Environmental Education

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Nous vivons des vies contradictoires. Nous souhaitons vivre sur, avec et par la terre… et pourtant nous gênons ces possibilités. Nous empiétons sur les écosystèmes, nous empiétons sur la vie qui se déploie, nous empiétons sur nos bonnes intentions. Nous touchons et sommes touchés par nos téléphones et cellulaires, nos ordinateurs, nos machines, nos édifices, mais pas par les uns et les autres. Il est même encore plus rare pour nous de faire une réelle rencontre, de se laisser aller à être enlacé par la terre, les arbres, le feuillage, les animaux. Le murmure constant du corporatisme et de la consommation tracent un chemin au cœur de nos conversations intérieures, noyant la voix et la musique du monde. Les lumières éclatantes de nos habitations éloignent les étoiles et la noirceur.

L'éducation à l'environnement nous demande de prendre conscience, de prendre soin, et de poser un geste en réponse à cela. Mais sommes-nous prêts pour cette prise de conscience ? Qu'est-ce que cela pourrait signifier, de penser et d'écrire sur notre champ d'étude de manière à répondre à l'intouché, le non-vu, le non-entendu ? Quels nouveaux modes d'être ensemble, de travailler ensemble, de penser ensemble pourraient être engendrés par tel effort ? Que devons-nous voir, entendre et prendre soin de manière urgente dans cette « saison de grande non-vérité » (Smith, 2006, p. 59).

Point de réponse simpliste ou singulière à ces questions. Toutefois, il est important de les poser même si cela est compliqué, incomplet et parfois douloureux. Voici la prémisse qui a guidé votre comité de rédaction dans la réalisation de ce numéro spécial de CJEE. *Nous espérions éliciter des confessions, des questionnements pointus et profonds, des recherches inusitées, des expérimentations au niveau du genre et de la parole. Vous retrouverez ces éléments présents dans les articles qui suivent ; toutefois, il nous a semblé difficile de « rester ténébreux », du moins dans une revue comme celle-ci, car nous sommes habitués à porter et brandir le masque du faire et du savoir.*

We live contradictory lives. We long to live on, with, and through the earth … yet we get in the way of such possibilities. We get in the way of ecosystems, we get in the way of life unfolding as it knows best, we get in the way of our own best intentions. We touch and are touched by our phones, our computers, our machines, our buildings, but not each other. It is even rarer for us to genuinely encounter, or allow ourselves to be held by, the earth, the trees, the foliage, the animals. The insistent chatter of corporatism and consumerism makes its way

into our inmost conversations, drowning out the voice and music of the world. The bright lights of human habitation obscure the stars and the darkness.

Environmental education asks us to become aware of, to care about, and to do something in response to these things. But are we ready for such awareness? What would it mean to think and write about our field in ways that respond to the untouched, unseen, unheard? What new ways of being together, working together, thinking together might be engendered in such an effort? What *are* the things we most urgently need to attend to, to see, hear, and feel anew, in this "season of great untruth" (Smith, 2006, p. 59).

There are no simple or single answers to these questions. The asking of them, however, is important, even if it is complicated, incomplete, and sometimes painful. That is the premise that guided us, your three editors, to compile this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*. We hoped to elicit confessions, soul-searchings, hard questionings, unfamiliar kinds of inquiry, experiments with voice and genre. Elements of these are present in the following papers, but overall, we have the sense that "going dark" remains a very difficult thing to do, at least in a venue such as this, where we are all used to wearing—indeed, brandishing—the masks of knowing and doing.[1]

Figure 1. Loon Lake: Group pinhole camera photograph, developed by Bob Jickling

Some of these papers were originally presented at a gathering at the Golden Ears campground and Loon Lake Conference Centre in Maple Ridge, British Columbia. Using funding from a research grant connected to the Maple Ridge Environmental School, we brought together a number of environmental educators and scholars (at various points in their careers and life pathways) to spend time together both inside and outside, formally and informally, considering and pursuing dark matters in the varied areas that make up environmental education broadly conceived. As part of this introduction, we invited them to contribute brief reflections or vignettes from our time together. Excerpts from these pieces of writing are woven into the following scene-setting essay; initials identify the individual authors, who are listed with our thanks at the end.

Between Conviviality and a Rain-Swept Lake

When I think of Loon Lake and those first few days in the rainy woods, what thoughts, feelings, and images come to mind? In very situated terms, perhaps the gathering started off on difficult, slippery terrain with all that rain. While we were invited to this place, my memories of being wet in the cold and dark challenge my sense of hospitality, where being invited in is redolent with the feeling of coming out of the cold and dark into a golden, warm house with friendly faces, lively conversation, music, and food. As it was, I arrived late and in the dark to Golden Ears with my partner and our young child. We set up our tent on the hard, wet gravel pad by the outhouses and walked through the rain toward a small group of heavily clothed strangers huddled under small pup-tents, quietly eating a meal under the harsh white light of LED headlamps. There was no sense of welcome and, although we recognized a few familiar faces, we felt like outsiders as we found our food and sat under a separate tent to eat. (JO)

How do we open our hearts and our senses, and let go of our fears? So much depends on our response to these elemental challenges. "The personal is political" and thoroughly social, as the feminist movement taught us two generations ago; the personal is also ecological (and vice versa), as Theodore Roszak (1978) and others have argued. Whatever we do, however much we long to encounter the world as our wild and unencumbered selves, we are constantly confronted by our embeddedness in human worlds of meaning.

The darkness of that first encounter, the solitary cold and pervasive wetness of those first few days, are uncomfortable memories that unsettle the glorious, golden, open vision of solidarity and coming togetherness that I imagined would characterize this [gathering]. I still recoil from the sense of self-sufficiency that seemed to dictate the way our bodies were kept apart by layers of clothing and closed postures intended to retain individual bodily warmth and shed water. The "solitary man in the wilderness" paradigm is not mine—I seek companions and relationships in the ways diverse ideas, bodies, materials, and dreams twist together in the practices we call environmental education. However, in these difficult times,

Figure 2. Strangers in the dark[2]

perhaps being strangers and different, unknowable, to each other is part of creating the necessary assemblages that ethical engagement requires. (JO)

It is not just about letting our guard down, then; it is also about acknowledging the Otherness that surrounds and permeates our relationality. To be in relation is to embrace difference as well as sameness, apartness as well as togetherness. How easy it is, for those of us privileged to read and think and write (in our dry, safe homes and offices, well fed and clothed, linked in to water and energy and communication systems built over decades) to imagine the world as we would remake it; how dark and difficult to encounter it just as it is. And how haunted we can be by the images and narratives prevalent in our culture, feeding our fears and our separateness, getting in the way of responding with openness of heart and mind to the Other's presence.

Later, warm and dry again in the comfortable lodge at Loon Lake, my recollections of the sense of conviviality that came from being in a heated building where evenings were filled with music and laughter are still overshadowed by memories of the dark lake's rain-swept skin, and the lingering chill of its sweet, satiny waters enveloping my pale body. Perhaps this permeating chill, this isolating darkness is the dark matter of environmental education. We are far, far from moving beyond such darkness, finding new leaders to escape it all or writing up glowing manifestos to inspire the masses to glorious utopias (as much as these hopes may profoundly contribute to remaining dedicated to our work). Lingering in darkness is part of the difficult work of unsettling colonial histories and bodies, learning from land that is wounded, and committing oneself and ourselves to ethical engagements, difficult as these may be. (JO)

Figure 3. Songs of Loon Lake

At Loon Lake, like nearly everywhere in British Columbia, we were on unceded Aboriginal territory—in this case, the territory of the Katzie Nation, a small Coast Salish people who are the traditional occupants of the flood plain between the Pitt and Fraser Rivers. Some 60 years ago, Dutch engineers diked and drained the marshes, converting rich gathering grounds of wapato and wild cranberry into fields for horses and dairy cows. The summit of Sheridan Hill, the site where the great Katzie hero Swaneset first arrived on earth, is now a gravel pit. Down at its base, the Swaneset Golf Club displays its welcome sign with no apparent shame.

An Uncertain and Personal Journey

I headed to Loon Lake in the pouring rain … pouring as only it can in Vancouver. I had a vague idea of where I was going. Over 30 years ago I worked as a child care counselor in a Maple Ridge alternative school program for young children who did not fit the regular school setting. Each day I would carpool with one of the teachers from Vancouver. At that time it was a simple commute and fairly rural, but as I looked at the current map I saw that roads had multiplied and bridges offered new options. I was uncertain about the journey.

As I drove from the ferry and followed the directions I had downloaded I made a couple of wrong turns. The malls and developments had changed the landscape

considerably; I was in strange territory. The pouring rain and grey clouds hid the mountains that would have been recognizable landmarks.

I made it to the research forest; the dark, dripping trees, the rocky logging roads and the incessant rain were more familiar. I could find some comfort in the rain and evergreen darkness of big trees growing close together. (EE)

As humans, we look for markers, signs to guide us—and in the constantly shifting landscape of liquid modernity, those may not be where we expect or need them. One of the difficulties faced by environmental education is that it is in some ways a *reactive* and *defensive* field, a response to the directions education and our larger culture took in the 19th and 20th centuries, and not something rooted in vernacular tradition outside of that context, in uncolonized forms of life. Hence the importance of experiential and outdoor education, as forms of practice that at their best do offer glimpses of our wild selves moving in harmony through the wild world. This notion of tradition is broadened and deepened by what Indigenous education brings to the table. And yet, coming together at Loon Lake, we found ourselves making it up as we went along, hampered by our lack of a shared history, our limited knowledge of the places themselves, and our varied commitments and perspectives—ultimately uncertain what moves might nurture a sense of comfort and trust.

Surely one can work on this quest alone, but through this gathering it becomes apparent that trying to form a "community" which does this presents reserves of strength, support, and inspiration, and heralds the uncomfortable feelings/questions needed for this work. We just begin to tug at some ends of this dark matter when we must part again. So how do we maintain a robust community (in our multiplicity/diversity) that is committed to troubling ecologically destructive norms/paradigms ... together, collectively and within our own ways of knowing and being? What ways might we continue to support and challenge each other to ask the harder questions despite the physical distance that divides? (LP)

"Our knowledge of the world instructs us first of all that the world is greater than our knowledge of it," Wendell Berry (1983, p. 56) reminds us. And so what could be more necessary or more natural than to reach out to others "who rejoice in abundance and intricacy," for whom "this is a source of joy"? Yet such comings together simultaneously confront us with our own limitations, both individual and collective, and challenge us to learn more about *ourselves,* our own abundance and intricacy… both its bright and its shadow sides.

And so we might also ask: How to avoid tearing ourselves apart over matters of semantics, personal pride, or particular approved actions? This is the mechanism of oppression in action: divide the oppressed and their allies, have them fight amongst themselves, never allow them to unite in common cause against the larger challenge. We are spread thinly over long distances, we know each other in passing and cursory ways, we critique each other's motives/techniques/theories for minor institutional victories or out of ignorance, we play scornful fiddle tunes about each other's minor failures to lead the supposed

"good" environmental life while the world burns, dies, and blows away. How do we come together across these differences so as to better respond to the patriarchal, fragmenting, utilitarian, oppressive, and violent cultural overlord?

Humility was an important shadow and advisor through this time spent contemplating Dark Matters. …What I am left with is reverence for the work and for the people who "do" it in so many different ways, and a reaffirmation that this work has the potential to ignite and to consume.

A healer in the Traditional Chinese Medicine field, Scott Davis, whom I have learned a great deal from over the last 15 years, told me recently that my physical being has kinship with fire. This is both a challenge and a gift.

The challenge of fire is that when it burns brightly, it throws bright light around it in a way that emphasizes the contrasts between objects (positions, opinions, philosophies). It is reactive, merciless, consumes quickly, and is hard to control. I certainly experience this sometimes in worrying about challenging assertions, and about needing to remember to be respectful and humble while doing so; there were some moments at Loon Lake that I both cringe at and take pride in simultaneously.

The gift of fire is to spread warmth and light; keep it burning lower, in a way that invites rather than consumes, and fire shows and provides context and connection, instead of (or perhaps as well as) contrast and burning. I will be learning this lesson over and over again in my lifetime. Listening to people, to intuition, to inspiration, to shadow, to Land and learning from the reactions and the contexts my fiery nature shows me will not be dull. Never dull. My hope is that this fire can revel in the Dark Matters; I think the dark may just be where I live. (AS)

Design in the Face of the Unseen and Unheard

The main gathering took place in a conference centre in the middle of the Malcolm Knapp Research Forest, perched on a rocky peninsula at one end of a long lake with steep wooded slopes rising on either side. There were trails in the woods, and the waters always beckoned … yet seeking to hear and be heard, and enfolded in an enduring downpour, we found ourselves spending much of our time indoors.

Golden Ears (the camping trip) was a wet opportunity for 20 of us to temporarily rewild in the un-enclosed forest."Indoors" again at Loon Lake, for another few and still raining days, we reverted to the orthodox closures of bodies-time-space. Heated rooms, catered meals, and timetabled arrangements. Cell/mobile phones and laptops reappeared. Interactions and communication were markedly different. Few of the now 40 of us moved (Ingold, 2011) out or away. The social dynamic and its "ecologies" changed dramatically within the built fabric of the lodge, recalling Dwayne Huebner's (1967) prescient problematizing of the connection between "environmental design" and "learning." (PP)

What really happened in this invitation to rewild, this *opportunity to slow down* (DZ)? How odd, how dark, that a group of environmental educators should

Figure 4. Standing in wonder

find themselves caught up in these dry/wet, light/dark, warm/cold dichotomies—backgrounded by beauty and mystery, yet struggling to be even quasi-wild.

Binaries and dualisms, and their associated values-hierarchical thinking have troubled various de/reconstructionists within the textually driven discourse of environmental education.… One dark binary that has escaped attention is the indoor–outdoor one. The unfulfilled quest for "evidence" supporting embodied, emplaced, and inter/transdisciplinary (environmental/experiential) education persists, at significant cost to the field's "progress." Can researchers rewild themselves? What is the experience of nature and nature of experience for the researched and the researcher or ecopedagogue? Can we then generatively and generously build a legitimating "knowledge" base about the environmental and social design of the rewilding experiences of programs, curriculum and ecopedagogy? (PP)

Good, searching questions … which then beg further questions. Such as—design for whom?

There were many times during this gathering when I felt privileged, tucked away in a retreat centre watching the wind make patterns on the lake. Questions came to me: What about class considerations? Not all of us have the same level of accessibility to semi-wild spaces, we know this. Can the voice of the more-than-human be heard and felt in urban environments? I would argue: rarely. The quiet I felt by the side of the lake … there is no urban equivalent. (LP)

The dark reality is that most of the world's population now lives in cities, and many of those cities are placing what is left of their wild surroundings

under enormous stress. Seeking our own revivifying contact with the more-than-human world, are we neglecting the bounds of the possible and the ecologically sound? To have the two million people in the Greater Vancouver area head out each weekend for some wilderness time would surely be a disaster at every conceivable level. Yet is not environmental education about them, too?

So this makes me think of larger questions: what is urgent in priority in the field right now? The call-out for the "unseen, unheard" seems appropriate, this act of making visible that which is so easily invisible—the salal bobbing in the rain, the deer crossing the path at night, the people that grow our food, the journey that our clothes took before reaching our bodies, yes. But also, the larger norms of modern western culture that place blame for the ecological crises on the citizen rather than the institution/corporation/government. To realize that turning off our taps keeps us complacent from bothering the irrigation industry that is draining our rivers, to see that switching our light bulbs allows us to be in the dark about the government's lax stance on environmental impact assessments. This highlighting of the invisible, the unseen needs to happen as well within our own field. Who was missing at this conference? What voices are being heard? And which are dismissed? Who assumes "power" in the community and why? (LP)

In the end, "education" is not just a matter of knowing, or even being, but also a matter of *engaging* with the world, the world in which we are always already engaged, "beyond our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 2000, p. xxviii). It is a world of myriad inequalities, injustices, mutings, and manipulations—also, alas, as in Berry's dictum, abundant and intricate beyond our comprehension. How best to respond? Perhaps, among other ways, through Foucault's (1984) stance of "hyperactive pessimism": "It is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous"(p. 343). And thus asking ourselves: What dangers do *we* pose, to ourselves, to others, and to the places we love? And how can we untangle ourselves from those dangers, or awaken others to the need to do so? And avoid crippling ourselves with guilt in the process?

When the opportunity to join the Dark Matters group appeared I was intrigued … partly because I was interested in the dark side of a subject that is often romanticized. Like young children nature is too often simplified and idealized—the answer to obesity, depression, and too much screen time. Children are people with active and curious minds, continually theorizing, thinking and reflecting and seeing them as innocent, cute, or sweet obfuscates the complexity of childhood. (EE)

Bedtime reading prior to the three soggy days in the Golden Ears woods included Jay Griffiths' (2013) Kith *and George Monbiot's (2013)* Feral. *Both "journalistic" pieces are radical. Griffiths targets the unnaturalness of childhood, in particular the many enclosures in which children are now "placed," and, increasingly, commodified for profitable others. Schools are an example. Exploration, freedom, and closeness to nature are lost to these original, young Romantics. For Monbiot, rewilding is about resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find its own way. Monbiot's self willed nature operates at two levels—the ecosystemic and the feral, the latter to be reclaimed if the former is to have a chance.* (PP)

It seems that hyperactive pessimism is itself in need of tempering. There is a need for openness to possibility, to what Paulo Freire (2000) called "untested feasibility" (p. 83)—an imaginative awareness of the latent potential in our students, our communities, our schools, our selves. This is not something apart from worldly engagement, but another dimension of it—a bittersweet inhabiting of the gap between the what-is and the what-might-be. Much environmental education, at its most transformative, takes place in this space of the in-between.

I have learned that being outside with the children in the Nature Kindergarten poses questions and provokes thought. I have been reminded of the complexity of children's play and have wondered at the role that the "natural" setting has on the play, on the teachers' relationships with the children. Being outside provides space and time for different teaching/learning, offers opportunities for deep play, and supports multiple relationships. There are many narratives, conflicting and powerful, that we come in contact with outdoors.

Taking young children into the forest is not a simple activity and it challenges us to think deeply about we are doing. We are challenged to engage in meaningful relationships with the place. What stories do we tell of that place, what history does it hold, what darkness should we share? How do we challenge young children to think deeply? (EE)

How, then, do we envision the role of the educator in all of this? It is clear that the project is complex, layered with decolonization, reinhabitation, reconciliation, remediation, and a potential search for the culturally unknown. The predominant culture of the North and West is self-evidently alienated from the non-human world; it is left to environmental educators to find ways and means to sidestep these cultural tendencies built into the public system while never being able to fully sense (to paraphrase Foucault) *what they are doing does*. We do not know the end point towards which we head; we only know, in our hearts and in our guts, that the direction our culture is currently heading isn't the right one.

What is Possible?

> Often, education is described as the great hope for creating a more sustainable future; teacher-education institutions serve as key change agents in transforming education and society, so such a future is possible… By working with the administrations and faculties of teacher education institutions, governments can bring about systematic, economically effective change. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 11)

While I think many of us in this field do believe this, and for some this may be our mantra, I think few of us understand how difficult bringing about this change really is. The topic of the gathering, "dark matters" in environmental education, represented the feelings I was harbouring after having been involved with a group of colleagues in implementing a teacher education program with an emphasis on

sustainability and environmental learning at a faculty of education at a Canadian post-secondary institution. While reflections on the overall experience from students and community stakeholders were positive, the potential of the model (with students, faculty associates, and school associates fully supporting each other) was not fully realized. Stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of the SEEDs module were left feeling melancholic as we discovered "dark matter" in the difficulties with realizing a genuine Community of Practice (CoP) for environmental learning hosted within the structure of a large and diverse teacher certification program.

Teacher education programs acting alone will not bring about the change we want to see. If newly developed environmental educators are placed in teaching environments, such as the school culture or in the community where they teach, that do not support environmental learning, all will have been done for naught. From my experiences, and those of my colleagues, this is the situation our future environmental educators are placed in year after year. Until this is remedied, the change we want to see will not happen in our lifetimes, nor in those of others who follow. (CO)

Figure 5: Loon Lake tow raft

What did we hope for from the gathering, or from this issue? That we might come together to ask the questions that are difficult to ask. Questions, like the wrinkles, blemishes, and receding hairlines that we try to Photoshop out of existence as we put our best faces forward. Questions about our incompletenesses,

compromises, hypocrisies, and failures as a field, those which are a challenge to formulate and harder still to answer, those which might imply pain before joy, discomfort before satisfaction (self or otherwise).

What would I die for? I am not sure of anything any more … I have succumbed to complacency. How wretched it is to yearn to be embodied within a disembodied self. Still Loon Lake created a space for me to touch and to be touched by the human and more-than-human. I was enthralled as a number of us tugged ourselves across the lake on the tow raft just to wander and wonder on the other side. As the waters from the sky showered me I was reminded of how the world cares for and nurtures itself. So why did I not embrace it more? What was I afraid of? (JAK)

We hoped that we might find ways to support one another in these challenges posed, to offer alliances as each struggles alone with self and in silo, to know that the puzzle is taking form and that each holds a necessary if seemingly disconnected fragment. That the expansion of research might become a shared enterprise, no longer quick individual sprints to snatch low-hanging fruit but an evolutionary endeavor by many, realistically acknowledging the field's limitations while formulating plans to best respond.

Finally, in the Loon Lake gathering, we hoped that we might acknowledge place and its denizens as fellow travelers and teachers—listening carefully to, attending well to, reveling in, committing to, enduring with, and embracing it and them. As we realize now, we had hoped for much; but much is what we think is needed right now in, of, and through this field called environmental education. We hope that this issue helps inspire, provoke, and unsettle you into a deeper seeing, hearing, and touching of the world and our places in it.

Voices from Loon Lake: Alexa Scully (AS), Carlos Ormond (CO), Enid Elliot (EE), David Zandvliet (DZ), Jeanne Adèle Kentel (JAK), Julia Ostertag (JO), Laura Piersol (LP), Phillip Payne (PP).

Notes

1 Prior to this issue going to press we sadly learned of the death of one of the authors, Elizabeth Henry. She was a vibrant early scholar determinedly engaging with these dark matters… and who might still be with us had we found better ways of connecting with and supporting each other over the long haul. Death is, of course, traditionally associated with darkness, and yet Ernest Becker (1997), among others, has made us aware of the much greater darkness nourished by its denial, by turning away from our own mortality. How often do we as educators talk about this essential way in which we participate in the world, this ultimate form of engagement? Elizabeth's paper is published posthumously honouring her memory and her contributions.

2 Other than those noted, the photographs in this editorial were taken by Jeanne Kentel, 2013.

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