

Introduction

Open Texts and Ecological Imagination

When I began to solicit contributions for this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, I was interested in works that departed from the traditions of nature writing or traditional essays on environmental studies. I believe that the best new writing about the environment and ecological concerns are necessarily driven by narrative, by stories in which we as human individuals are strongly present. I wanted contributions to be voice-driven, in the first-person, so that the writer was present, not simply as an observer, but as an integral element in the narrative. These kinds of narratives provide the potential to connect to the environment or reconnect to the environment in ways that are vital to ecological concerns in the 21st century.

I have conceptualized this issue as an ecopoetics reader, anchored by the understanding of ecology as a theory of home. Ecology is defined by its etymological roots, coined by German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, *Ökologie*, from the Greek *oikos*, meaning house or home and *logia*, a study or theory, in essence, a theory of home. The poetics in ecopoetics is conceptualized as discourse and theory and as *poiesis*, a making. Additionally, the authors' works demonstrate a biocultural philosophy of ecological education, anchored in the belief that human biological experience is inseparable from the world as *oikos/home* and from our human relations to this world. This home is at once a natural phenomenon and an aesthetic and cultural world. Home is a process, a form of resistance to dystopia and environmental degradation. Environmental studies become integral to education, conceptualized not as a discrete discipline in the arbitrary manner of institutions of higher education; rather, education is conceptualized as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary, contained in and relevant to all fields of study.

Departing from the standard call for scholarly essays usually collected in this journal, I invited contributors to this special issue of *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* to submit scholarly and artistic works that exemplified "open" and "writable" texts. As Umberto Eco proposes in *The Role of the Reader*,¹ an "open" text engages readers in the creation of meaning, and each reading is both an interpretation and a performance. Expanding this notion, in Roland Barthes's 1971 essay, "From Work to Text,"² and in his essay of structuralist literary criticism "S/Z,"³ Barthes defines two kinds of texts as *lisible et scriptable* (readable and writable). The readable text is more comfortable for the reader, received in conventional forms, whereas the writable text may be more difficult, requiring the active participation of the reader as writer. This writable text is aligned with Eco's notion of the open text. The original text becomes a homeland that offers the reader a return to memory and possibilities of meaning. As Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes in *Journal*

of an Ordinary Grief, “writing remains the other shape of the homeland.”⁴

In this edited collection of open texts, the authors’ genres include flexible, hybrid forms of inquiry on art, literature, and place. The best new writing about environment is found in works by authors who approach their topics in experimental and heterodox ways. This writing is also an experiment in form including: reportage, scholarly essays, lyric essays, images, memoir, poetry, field reports, travelogues, and theoretical considerations that invite the reader to engage in acts of imagination. Through these forms we find something urgent, vital and attuned to the particulars of our times. Some of these forms may be read as studies of the local environment and discovery of the extraordinary in the ordinary. Other works may be read as elegies, contemplations on loss, on the changing world and power dynamics between humans and environments. These works are about new ways of seeing.

In considering what knowledge is necessary in environmental and ecological education, authors in this issue endeavour to explore the vital knowledge of our connections to the world as home, how to live well in this world, and the nature of our human relations to place and landscape. Education, taken up on these pages, includes an acknowledgement of the insistence of beauty and aesthetics despite terror, difficulty, ugliness, in an environment scarred by the politics of war, terrorism, and violence. Essential to the knowledge honoured in this collection is a sensibility of poetics, poetics of culture and place, and ecological literacy that determines how we read the world, considerations rooted in a vital poetics of relation that is the human imaginary.

The volume begins with Ian J. MacRae’s essay, “Butterfly Chronicles: Imagination and Desire in Natural and Literary Histories.” The author explores place-based narratives, scientific and cultural representations, the writings of Vladimir Nabokov, Gabriel García Márquez, A.S. Byatt, and a host of ancient and indigenous traditions. The narrative begins in Toronto’s Cabbagetown neighbourhood where a butterfly’s backyard visit leads to fascinating meditations on environmental and evolutionary determinisms, symbolic and transformative implications, simple pleasures and deeper joys. MacRae suggests that butterflies are evasive and call into question the way we ‘know’ and categorize the world.

In “Finding Home: A Walk, a Meditation, a Memoir, a Collage,” Kathleen Vaughan explores Cedarvale Ravine in a personal meditation linked to her Toronto neighbourhood. This excerpt, adapted from her doctoral dissertation, uses memoir as a form of critical place-based education, a multi-modal work comprising an illustrated text, plus a visual art installation in mixed media: large-scale drawings and textile maps, archival and contemporary photographs, textile sculptures. Vaughan explores questions of epistemology; the ethics of care; cultural theory; sustainability; environmental education, and art studio practice. Vaughan proposes that the devotional practices of walking, observation, research, and representation through collage can promote a feeling of being at home in the world.

Wanda Hurren, in her contribution titled “Postc(art)ographia: A Mapwork Project About Identity and Place,” presents excerpts from a collection of postcards, titled *postcartographia*. The work challenges the viewer/reader to experience these postcards as place-based narratives that provoke fascinating vignettes of memory and implications for the consideration of identity in relation to place and geographical and environmental conditions.

In his essay, “Envoicing Silent Objects: Art and Literature at the Site of the Canadian Landscape,” Richard Brock discusses how imperialist Group of Seven paintings and Atwood’s notion of counter-discursive “death by landscape” vie with each other to tell the truth about Canadian landscape. Brock’s work reveals the partial and fragmented nature of our literary and visual representations of place.

Susan K. Moore refers to her readings of Jane Urquhart’s novel *A Map of Glass* and Julia Kristeva’s concepts of psychoanalysis to discuss how the disappearance of place and the mourning of this loss “interrupt and transform how we live and learn together.” *A Map of Glass* is a story about displacement and change in past and present day Ontario. Moore juxtaposes her literary analysis of Urquhart’s work with her own personal narrative of relocating from Calgary to Ontario.

Priscila Uppal, in her suite of poems titled “Brazil, Under these Circumstances,” considers her sense of Brazil, her mother’s homeland. Uppal’s mother is a “runaway mother,” a mother she had not seen or heard from since she was eight years old. Traveling to Brazil in 2003, without the language of the place and without knowing what she might find, Uppal began to connect with her mother’s side of the family. From her own complex position as a Canadian born in Ottawa, Uppal explores the ways in which Brazil’s landscape and geography are affected by her relationships with her mother and her family, and by ongoing questions about identity.

Di Brandt’s “Nine River Ghazals” was commissioned by The Winnipeg Writers Festival. The sequence of ghazals moves through The Forks at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers that were historically a part of a vast continental network of water routes. The Forks was a traditional aboriginal gathering place, a location for trade and settlement, as well as the site of Fort Rouge, Fort Gibraltar and the two Forts Garry. Now Winnipeg’s central “meeting place,” The Forks is explored in fascinating ways through Brandt’s poems, works that reveal archeological and historical narratives that are often embedded in “a theology of scars.”

Amy Friend’s photo essay, “127 Florence Avenue,” is a meditation on place, home, and individual history. The idea for the essay came to Friend as she emptied the drawers of her grandmother’s attic after her death and pieced together the construction of a unique “round” house by her grandfather. Along with archival research, newspaper clippings, photographs, and literary references to writings on place, including Gaston Bachelard and Emily Dickinson, Friend records her own experiences of the round house. Originally

bound by Friend into a hand-bound chapbook, this series of reflections on memory, time, and place provokes questions about our connections to specific places and architecture as histories become layered and multiplied over time.

In her essay “Latina Landscape: Queer Toronto,” Karleen Pendleton-Jiménez peels back the layers of history underneath the 519 Church Street Community Centre in Toronto, a place where Pendleton-Jimenez organized a group for women of diverse Latin American origins to meet to talk and write. The historical inquiry leads to an exploration of the urgent and necessary investigation into queer and Latina identity as integral to the complex considerations of Canadian identity and notions of home.

Deema Shehabi’s contribution is a suite of four poems titled “Listening is Made for the Ashen Sky.” These poems make vivid the landscapes of Palestine through images of Jordan and Jaffa, of Aleppo pine, the streets of Nablus, occupied people, blue Palestinian pottery, violet courtyards, and a house behind a façade of ancient sepiia. These are elegiac poems of mourning, loss, and aching beauty.

In her essay “Nose Hill Artifacts,” author Vivian Hansen binds together stories and memories—historical, collective, and personal. Through her attempt to know both the natural and cultural geography of an urban green-space in northwest Calgary, she realizes in the process how difficult and daunting this task is.

In her essay “Take the C Train,” Rebecca Lawton writes about her experience as a whitewater guide who learns to use her body to maneuver through rough spots and reversals that stop her downstream journey. Lawton describes this technique as getting into the “C” train of the current and she compares the skill to navigate river holes with the practice and patience she needed as musician in an improvisational jazz ensemble in Utah.

In her suite of poems, simply titled “South: Four Poems,” Ann Fisher-Wirth evokes the American deep south in the landscape of Mississippi. Vivid and visceral, the poet and teacher are present in these narratives about desire in a land of sea turtles, magnolia, sweet gum, heat, humidity, herons, crayfish, cypress, catfish, cottonmouths, bass, and mercury laced waters. Throughout, the poet takes us into “Ole Miss” so we can hear the “blue buzzing in the honeysuckle” and the particularities of voice, vernacular, and expression that ultimately reveal a transcendent love of place.

Carol Anne Wien’s essay, “Lake,” is a lyric chronicle of a swimmer examining how she has come to know a particular lake in Nova Scotia. Wien describes her struggle with the elements over the years while swimming in this lake, dealing with the particularities of environment and climate, including extremely cold temperatures, the constraints of her own body, as well as the complex effects of events and relationships in her life.

Margo Berdeshevsky’s stunning excerpts of photographs and poems from her “Tsunami Notebook” were written in response to her trip to Sumatra

in 2005 as a volunteer to a survivor clinic in Aceh after the environmental devastation of the tsunami in Indonesia. Berdeshevsky's work is an example of what I call historiographic poesis: art-making in response to history, a form that provides immense possibilities to researchers engaged in artistic practices.

Lynn Fels's contribution is titled "Wind Journal: Excerpts from a Sailor's Notebook." In this essay, Fels reveals her "love affair" with a sailboat and how this has affected her interactions with landscape and others through the years. We come to see how waterscapes, winds, and environmental conditions have had indelible influences on her sailing experiences and on her life over the years. For Fels, water and wind trigger a range of memories and desires; the temperament of the water and the transience of her mark on the environment are considered alongside the flux of human relationship and love.

The final essay, by Ann E. Michael, is titled "Whitman's Paumanok Poems and the Value of Being Faithful to Things." Michael explores the ways in which American poet Walt Whitman establishes trust or faith between the reader and his poems by providing concrete and rich imagery in his Paumanok series. Michael proposes that Whitman provides, through these poems, a starting point or a foundation from which we can journey with him as his poetry moves us into contemplation of the transcendental.

As a coda to this issue, and to this introduction, we return, at the end of this volume, to the question of the butterfly introduced on the first pages by Suzanne Northcott's painting "Nabokov's Butterflies," and Ian MacRae's opening essay "Butterfly Chronicles." I have closed this issue of CJEE with a poem of my own, titled "Slow Burn," written in response to the environmental devastation of the Iraq war, a response to a news story about an American soldier and a murdered Iraqi girl, as well as the destruction of natural nesting grounds by military weapons. The poem brings us back to the opening image of this collection—the butterfly—appearing also in the final photograph by Joe Paczuski of the monarch butterfly on Ward Island in Toronto.

With this return to the butterfly held up to our history of violence and militarism, we might return to the possibilities of the work of art and remember the final scene of the film adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. In this scene, a soldier, disillusioned by the unnatural violation of years of combat in World War I, leans out of the trench, risking his life to touch a butterfly. In this instant, he is killed by a sniper. The disconnection between the dystopic human world of war and slaughter and the natural world is rendered palpable through art, through story. In the context of environmental writing and current history, what remains hopeful is that we are still capable of risk, of striving towards the sensibility of the butterfly's capacity, of the natural world's capacity, to arouse in us, a relation to place that promises hopefulness and joy.

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- ¹ Eco, Umberto. *The Role of the Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979:49.
- ² Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." In *Modern Literary Theory*. Edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. New York: Arnold, 1996.
- ³ ———. *S/Z*. originally published Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1970. Translated by Richard Howard and Richard Miller. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1974.
- ⁴ Darwish, Mahmoud. *Journal of an Ordinary Grief*, 1973. Cited by Ibrahim Muhawi in the introduction to *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*. Berkeley: University of California Press:xviii.