

JOANNE ARNOTT, MICHAEL BLACKSTOCK, PETER CULLEY, ROGER FARR, CHRISTINE LECLERC & RITA WONG / “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”: On Poetry and the Environmental Crisis

This discussion took place on September 18, 2011, on a private “Ecologies” blog set up for the occasion. Participants were asked to circulate statements in advance addressing how ecological thought informs their practice as poets; the individual statements precede the discussion below. On the 18th, we met online to elaborate and nuance the statements in dialogue. I posed three questions to the group to focus discussion on perceived points of confluence and variance before taking a boat to Mudge Island for an apple harvest, where I was temporarily stranded. The discussion then emerged more-or-less organically in the form of individual posts and comments. The text has been edited for brevity and print coherence. Thanks to Joanne, Michael, Peter, Christine, and Rita for their generous and insightful words.

—Roger Farr, 28/12/11

CHRISTINE LECLERC:

Imagine yourself in the middle of a field.

Imagine yourself in the middle of an open pit mine in the middle of a field.

You are in an open pit mine in the middle of a forest.

You are in a mine on a mountain.

You are in an open pit.

A body likes places where it, the world and language can be together.

I’m thinking about scale.

Something interesting happens when I look at images of massdestruction. I look past the destruction. The destruction hits me past my ability to understand how it’s hitting me. The scale hits me though.

This was intended by the photographer, you might say. You're supposed to feel alienated by aerial shots of large-scale destruction.

But I feel alienated when I visit sites of massdestruction also, only more so.

I am also encouraged. The pursuit of scale has involved many discussions. In these discussions, the image clings to the massiveness of the destruction. The task of encountering trauma begins to seem possible, negotiable. Manageable, even. Like the destruction was managed into the world.

For me, this is also a source of activism. It is the watershed thought-moment when occupation becomes possible because it is possible to encounter massdestruction in the image or landscape more fully, in the mind.

JOANNE ARNOTT:

Like the teepee and the "totem" pole, like the dream catcher and feathered head dress, these things (inuksuit) have slipped from one culture into different cultural contexts, and the relationships between the source and the receiving cultures are complex—if a modern inuksuk is made by Inuit builders in a large, southern, urban setting, is it "real"? Are they "real" because I can see them? If I don't know the full history of the maker of a specific marker made of stone, what is the correct response—well, the real response, of course, reflecting all of the complexity of cultural oppression, the large taking and suppressing, robbing and idealizing, as represented by all the individual moments of life.

The number of layers of translation or transformation between the original creations of stone markers on specific landscapes, and my self-expressive words and images, are several. One of the reasons for anxiety is how a feedback loop is created, so that the translations and transformations of cultural imagery then dilute and at times replace the origin tradition, impulse, meaning. My clumsy efforts to discuss the ethics of these things will one day bring about better insight, I'm sure, just as I'm sure that one day, my family will be at peace, self-confident, safe in the world that gave birth to us. For context, see safe place to make camp, <http://joannearnott.blogspot.com/2011/08/safe-place-to-make-camp.html>

MICHAEL BLACKSTOCK:

"I am just in poetry for the money," announces Wyget, the trickster. My poetry is water, and water is poetry. And in the words of the modern-day cowboy poet, Mike Puhallo: "I don't let truth get in the way of a good story—but I still try and make it real." As a poet I am at-the-ready to run the ragged edge; when my plan hits black ice, I will engage the hubs into four-wheel drive. Ingredients for my poems: elbow sweat and blessed visitations from characters of everyday life walking through my door, or on the breath of my ancestors. You will find Canadiana clues in a lot of my poems. Poetry is a reservoir for culture and identity.

PETER CULLEY:

"je suis la grand zombie"—Dr. John

I put off this piece of writing as long as I could, and write now with the reluctant certitude that I can have little of value to add to any discussion of ecology or "the fate of the earth." Such slivers of hope as I might have entertained in the pre 9/11 years that the western powers would address even such vitally urgent matters as global warming have been dashed both by the almost total consolidation of corporate power enabled by the "war on terror" and the ensuing campaign of fear that has effectively pummelled and paralysed political discourse into an ipso facto fascism. Whatever they want, they're going to get, and if they can make a profit up till the last day of life on earth they're going to. And it's long past the point where quixotic acts of civil disobedience, electoral politics or even sabotage are going to stop them. We all know this I suppose, but this knowledge doesn't fill me with the demonic energy it does some people—that need to do something/anything against the awful reality pressing in, to be seen as "positive" in the absence of real hope. That there are hours in the privileged days of my life—out roaming with the dog, looking at dictionaries, listening to Scarlatti and Charley Patton in my backyard trailer—in which I can forget these things I don't deny. But like my tinnitus or the arthritis in my foot it can come flooding in at any moment, with accompanying guilt a bonus. The question for me now is how then to live, to continue to work as an artist (always touch and go) in the absence of any utopian possibility? Inertia? Habit? Like an anchorite in a cave? What form of denial should I go with?

RITA WONG: *undercurrent*

my watery-body is slowly re-mem-bering that it is part of ____ the capilano watershed,
& before that, the bow river, fresh water ceaselessly rippling home to ocean larger than
the continental divide is pacific

my salty-body is always part of that flow, not separate from it. hydro-logical inter-being.
broken apart by colonial conquer-and-divide, how to now build a raft named respect,
spaciously? how can poetics relate to thousands of years of human activity on this
continent, but through listening? to each other, the birds, the trees, the wind, the
water . . .

as an uninvited guest on this land, how can my actions bridge the gap between intention
and effect? land feeds me—i am a world eater, and what do i give back to the world?
poems are slow seeds, but will they grow?

immersed in the muddy, polluted stream that we call the english language, i still need
the stream to live, even as i filter the pollutants, rearrange them in funny shapes in
order to try to understand what they are doing to my body, and yes, i eat dirt. geophagy,
it is called. made all the more dangerous by what has been mined from earth's bowels:
uranium, copper, coltan, selenium, gold, silver, nickel, zinc, and more

foraging for ways to survive, to understand crisis and contradiction, makes a bricolage
poetics, a way of writing through and in the mess, toward what sun & moon teach: a
hopeful act, a necessary one

ROGER FARR:

Perhaps it is symptomatic of writing in the shadow of ecological catastrophe that I must
admit to a degree of sightlessness when it comes to the question of how environmental
problems can be taken up in a cultural praxis. While I agree with Mayakovsky that there
are certain problems in society for which solutions can only be found in *poetic terms*, I
am not entirely sure if this particular problem is of that sort, nor if the problem itself
has been properly put (i.e., do we have an “environmental problem” or an “industrial-
civilization problem”?). But insofar as we may be opening up here the old questions
about the political agency and capabilities of poetry, it might be useful to consider
Jacques Ranciere's claim in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Continuum, 2006) that the test of
any truly “political” (i.e., dissenting, subversive, disruptive) art lies not in its content or

in its form, but in whether or not its “methods of presentation” can be appropriated by social movements in the course of *actual struggles*:

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them . . . what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible. . . . It is up to the various forms of politics to appropriate, for their own proper use, the modes of presentation or the means of establishing explanatory sequences produced by artistic practices rather than the other way around. (19)

The question facing the ecologically-oriented poet, then, is not *what* kind of poem to write “in response” to the current crisis, but rather *how* the techniques and methods of the poem as such can be made available to the environmental movement, in both its above- and under-ground formations. Given that “poetics,” in its minimum definition, refers to a repertoire—or perhaps an arsenal—of linguistic techniques and devices, we might then ask if there is anything in poetry’s tool-box that could be introduced as a counter-measure against the specifically *semiotic* weapons being deployed by the state to neutralize the movement for environmental defense.¹ I feel strongly that this requires something more than merely “raising awareness” and sensitivities. How can we, to use Jonathan Skinner’s formulation, overcome the generic limitations of “eco poetry”—and perhaps poetry in general—and *get the poem out of the poem*,² in order to make our writing available to “real struggles” against the state and in defense of the earth?

1. “Ecopoetics”

ROGER FARR: In a recent editorial to his journal *ecopoetics* (#6/7), Jonathan Skinner writes that the term “ecopoetics” is enjoying some currency today, but that it runs the

1 These techniques are described in detail in Jules Boykoff’s *Beyond Bullets: The Suppression of Dissent in the United States* (AK Press, 2007); see also my essay, “No Nature Poetry After Eugene: Writing in the Shadow of the Green Scare,” in *Dandelion* 35 (1).

2 See Jonathan Skinner’s “Boundary Work in Mei-mei Berssenbrugge’s ‘Pollen’” in *How2* 3(2).

risk of becoming “yet another form of branding, niche-marketing or ‘greenwashing.’ We would hope,” he continues, “that the term continue to be used with uncertainty and circumspection.” I’m wondering if any of you use this term to describe your work, and if you do, what you hope to designate; if you don’t use it to describe your own work, do you think it is useful to describe other writing practices?

RITA WONG: While I don’t necessarily go around calling my work “ecopoetics,” I do respond affirmatively when people ask me to talk about my work this way (i.e. at a session at the Under Western Skies conference in Calgary, or when asked for a statement as is happening right now). I’ve written elsewhere that a poetics begins with my body—a walking, breathing, dreaming bag of water—and I would tentatively define an ecopoetics as one that acknowledges how humans are dependent on nature (and therefore part of it, even though many people, including myself, have been systematically “educated” or indoctrinated to be alienated, ignorant, and/or mentally disconnected from acknowledging this dependence, through western colonial paradigms that have historically positioned “nature” as something to be conquered and exploited). An ecopoetics would begin, then, with acknowledging this relationship to the nonhuman, and attempt the difficult task of renewing a respect and relationship with the non-human, with the environment, with the planet, which is, in turn, (for me anyway) a more compelling way of rooting and reimagining our own short lives on this planet.

In trying to be brief about it, I’ve written on Sina Queyras’s *Harriet* blog for the Poetry Foundation that “Poetry is a world flowing and unfolding from both outside and inside.” While this may be a bit vague sounding, the “outside” raises questions like: “What is our relationship to the tar sands projects that are poisoning a huge watershed and accelerating climate change for the whole planet?” “If actions speak louder than words (as proclaimed by the Greenpeace banner at the Rainbow Warrior festival yesterday on Jericho Beach), how does poetics navigate a relationship to action?”

MICHAEL BLACKSTOCK: My first book of poetry is entitled *Salmon Run: A Florilegium Of Aboriginal Ecological Poetry*. My usage here is as a descriptor not a brand, an exemplar not a product. It is a collection of eclectic styles with nature and ecology as a sub-theme. I use “florilegium” as a *natura-caveat*, almost to say that this poetry is a bit like smoke or water running through your fingers—you can sense it without grasping or claspings. The book’s subtitle is meant to illuminate the title *Salmon Run*. The many and varied

salmon (poems), traveling through the landscapes of living water (chapters), together form the ecosystem (*Salmon Run*).

JOANNE ARNOTT: I was invited a few years ago to contribute to a proposed collection on eco-poetics, so I spent quite a few hours researching the term and trying to wrap my mind around what the term meant. This definition is what I came up with:

eco-poetics: the poetics of people sundered from a natural context, seeking return; strategies of compensation for cultural/linguistic pressures toward fragmentation.

My sense is (was) that this isn't precisely the same as pastoral, nature writing, or capture-the-moment expressions from diverse traditions, but a new "brand" specifically for people trained up in christian-english-mindframes: in other words, one must see oneself as tossed out of "the garden" in order to need to find ways to re-centre oneself in a coherent state of natural human expression.

I was powerfully influenced in my teens by Takeo Nakano's *Within the Barbed Wire Fence*, and other people (writers, teachers) working in Japanese and Chinese traditions/worldviews over the years, and so my understanding of my girlhood in Manitoba and everything subsequent—e.g. my creative perspectives—has been powerfully influenced by that permission to say what is and speak from the heart, and to reflect inner and outer worlds as a continuity, rather than severely segregated items. The integrated perception is culturally a big no-no in your basic english lit-christian and post-christian mindscape, and good lit/bad lit (good science/bad science, etc.) is measured by this fundamental ability to step outside yourself and pretend you aren't there. In my humble opinion, that is the basic sleight-of-mind/soul-sickness, right there. Not to imply that I have none: I had my basic catholic girl conditioning and my basic western education, and continue to negotiate between a centred/synthesized and out-of-the-garden way of being/seeing. So, in response to the question, I don't use the term "eco-poetics" for myself, although I am not troubled if another might apply it.

RW: It's interesting to observe a reluctant embrace of the term "ecopoetics" so far—not as a brand, but as a term that makes possible some necessary conversations (such as: language's role in grappling with the damage and contradictions one lives in and among). Yesterday, the artist Oliver Kellhammer mentioned his interest in the possibilities of going feral, and this is something that's been on my mind a lot too for the last while—

the attraction or draw of a return to land/watershed/place, not as some idealized human reinvention, but messy, unpredictable, life-centered, humble, knowledgeable of the horrific destruction, and refusing to be completely demoralized by it because what is out there (remnants/fragments of which also exist “in here”) exceeds human ego-mind, even if the egos running the petrostate don’t acknowledge this.

MB: I have been thinking about the word “sentient” in relation to how Western Science classifies water as non-living. One characteristic of a sentient being is the ability to form a relationship with another being. Of course I think this true of water. But what of a poem? Can poems form relationships with other beings, as amorphous as that may be? Ecopoetics may be about forming relationships between poems (or verses of a poem) to describe an ecosystem, and, furthermore, relationships between reader and writer? Is that the complete ecosystem: writer(s), verse(s), poem(s), reader(s)?

RW: With regard to Michael’s question, I think poems have their own lives, like seeds that may or may not sprout, depending on the conditions in which they land. With regard to water’s liveliness, I’m curious about how water writes us, writes our bodies, has so much to teach us, if we listen carefully. It bears the record, the memory, of everything our society puts into it: around cities this would include the traces of antidepressants, birth control pills, carcinogenic wastes; water holds it all, somehow. And returns it to us, eventually, transformed or not.

JA: I love the idea of a world in a continual state of creation and unfoldment, and an element of that is the transmission of ideas between languages and between cultures, between minds and communities—which is why we do such a thing as “re-branding” in order to call attention again or for the first time to some fundamentals we assess have been misplaced or overlooked.

CHRISTINE LECLERC: Responding to Skinner’s statement that ecopoetics “runs the risk of becoming ‘yet another form of branding’” and Arnott’s discussion of ecopoetics above, I see the term ecopoetics as useful in the ease that it adds to searching out works of this kind. But I also find the term misleading, mostly because I think there is a popular misconception about what an ecological perspective is. If an ecological perspective is about relationships, this cannot exclude the social, industrial, or human and non-human genocides and displacement. Likewise, an ecological perspective does not set “nature” aside as a subject of observation. Ecology is a radical departure from

the idea of nature. I see Michael's mention of the poem as ecosystem, which I really like. But, I would add "world(s)" to my own list of poetic ecosystem elements as, to my mind, worlds (and, perhaps funnily, poetry's non-readers) are often essential to my reading or writing of poems.

JA: I don't resonate with the idea that "Ecology is a radical departure from the idea of nature." In my own sense of the words, there is an equivalence between nature and ecology, nature and the tao, ecology and the tao, nature and human nature: it is more about a trend of change, unfurling realities, tempos, relationships, flavours . . . consonance and not dissonance. I am within my ecology and our ecological niches overspill and influence one another.

PETER CULLEY: With all due respect to Jonathan Skinner—the range and focus of whose magazine *ecopoetics* validated the term for me personally—the term has in recent years been too often too loosely applied, too often meaning almost any kind of "nature writing," often a re-validation of the tired power-loving lyrical subjectivity that is so manifestly part of the problem. My own initial attraction to Jonathan's sense of the term was its validation of the poet's skills as tools of pure research, the implication that the sense-data gatherings of poetic consciousness could be brought to bear on practical and immediate matters concerning our planet's future. This flattered my own sense, derived from Christopher Dewdney, that what I was doing was a kind of science—that I was "in the field." But the term *ecopoetics* has become victim of its own success, firmly embedded in structures—the literary establishment, the university, the "ecological movement"—that impose silent but sure impediments to action. But my larger sense is that it is all too late, that the model of the slow shaping of consciousness toward positive environmental action that those of us who considered ourselves artists or activists—"ecopoetic" or not—have been supporting and working towards isn't working. However we might feel, the vast majority of our fellow citizens will ultimately have no problem with development of the tar sands; whatever it is we're saying, it's not persuading too many people, and I think we have to start facing up to that.

RW: I realize, Peter, that the majority of fellow citizens aren't in active opposition to the tar sands, but I don't agree that it's too late. Or rather, whether or not it's too late is something I don't think I can know with certainty. And I refuse to ignore the efforts of the many people who are actively working toward stopping further destruction—

including over 1,250 people who faced arrest in mass civil disobedience outside the White House in recent weeks, large numbers of grassroots environmental organizations, and a number of Nobel Peace Prize laureates who've asked Obama to stop the Keystone XL pipeline.

I agree that we have to face up to the fact that we remain a minority. What I wonder, though, is about tactics. Poetry is not about “persuading” people, but it could perhaps be about investigating the world that we’re in, and sharing that process, however brokenly and imperfectly. So poetry on its own is not enough. How does it align, or not, to other activities that continue to hold the goal of a living/liveable commons? What kinds of relations does it attempt, whether or not it “succeeds”?

JA: The weight of despair is palpable, and as a pragmatist all I can say is—widen the scope: there is no specific start time or finish line, and there are billions of sentients at play and at work, continually replenishing streams of reality.

When I was ten, my parents (who had eight children) both gave up. My experience was: things got a whole lot worse for us. So, taking time to regroup and change direction is fine, and at the same time, leadership is a needed position. Acknowledging reality is a necessary strategy, while redefining reality as proven hopeless is depleting.

It is natural for fatigue to occur and for those who carry to lay down the burden, allowing others to move forward with the song: that’s a natural process, and it is okay to be at ease with that.

The quote Michael Layton shared that he’d heard from his late father Jack pertains: “always have a dream longer than a life.” That is a way to say trust the group, and is very much akin to what keeps long-term social justice struggles alive generation after generation after generation.

CL: I agree with Peter that poetry—ecopoetic or not—is not stopping the tar sands. But it still seems useful to me to witness and engage with environmental destruction. Publicly resisting environmental injustice is part of building community. And authentic response and action to violence creates space for those experiencing something like “well-informed futility syndrome” to enter into.

Thinking specifically of Peter writing that “Whatever it is we’re saying, it’s not

persuading too many people,” I think also of the idea of action writing. Action, writing something akin to history. I think about poetry readings and how they often involve sitting down. Then I think about the poems I hear read at marches, and the role poetry plays in each setting. And I think about how the marches are part of campaigns, and how the campaigns come from movements, and how the poems at the marches are in motion. I think about change, and the role of the poem, and the audacity of the idea that a poem was or ever could be influential in and of itself.

MB: Yes, Christine, you are making me think. I am thinking of the role of a witness at a Gitxsan feast. They are there to remember, to witness what is going on, and to be able to retell the story unfolding before them to their children. At minimum, we are witnesses and chroniclers, but I like to think we are more than that too. The time horizon is longer than we are taught. The results of our actions (writing) shows up one, two or seven generations from now, somehow, I think. Is that too late? Only time will tell, I guess, but we have to try.

RF: I’m curious about how poetics informs the activist work some of you are doing: Christine’s work against the Enbridge project, for example. Do people active as poets bring anything unique to the movement for environmental protection and defense?

CL: I like the way the question is framed, as I usually think about my activist work informing my poetics. Actually, I participated in poetic community before activism. But obviously, the crews aren’t mutually exclusive, and in a way, the more involved I became in activist work, the more I got to know poets involved in serving their non-poetic communities, and who are engaged in struggles for justice. That said, poetics does inform the activism that surrounds The Enpipe Line poetry project, as The Enpipe Line is fairly non-hierarchical. The contributions that make up the long line of this poem are selected by the poets who come forward with work and resistance to Enbridge’s proposed Northern Gateway Pipelines, and not a panel of editors. And the poem’s editors work on a volunteer basis. It may seem strange to describe the power relations that go into the making of The Enpipe Line as being part of its poetics, but I focus on it because I think it is an essential feature of the work and an important part of what the poem ultimately has to convey.

In terms of something unique poets can bring to struggles to stop unwanted mega-

projects and infrastructure, I think the poets on The Enpipe Line make a culture of resistance visible. But creative people have done this in many forms. With poets in particular, the contribution may have to do with a reminder of the existence of a linguistic commons, and the possibility of physical commons. There is also the act of bringing to edge of, or into, the public discourse, language that is not automatically rhetorical.

Can poets intervene in the corporate and political manoeuvring that allows unwanted projects to move forward? I'm very curious about this question, but don't yet have a clear answer.

2. Language

RF: In many of the discussions of ecopoetics that I have read, there often surfaces a line of thought—far too ubiquitous to attach to any one figure or tradition—that holds that it is possible to “re-inhabit” the earth, or sometimes simply “a place,” through attentive, embodied, and ecologically-informed writing. This line of thinking was especially prominent in the 1960s and 70s.

While I find this idea appealing, it's hard for me to reconcile with another line of poetic thought (influential for me) that holds that language does not offer direct, non-stop transport to the real; rather, language “cloaks” the real (the earth?) in the various fabrics of culture and ideology.

I'm wondering if any of you have a comment or question about this tension in contemporary poetics around the capabilities of language to “connect” us to the earth.

JA: Only to acknowledge that there is most certainly this tension, and it has a motive force!

I expect I approach this specific poetics conflict with a set of passionate opinions that may interfere with my ability to give a neutral overview—so, how to express my multivalent one-sidedness most effectively? When I look at disturbed earth, I may feel upset about how humans mess everything up. If someone tells me that, in fact, a specific disturbance was created thousands of years ago by the passing of a glacier, then

my feeling shifts. How I feel about the hand of the glacier seems to be a lot different from how I feel about the hand of a human, and yet in either case, the change can be seen as a neutral—a reality—rather than the beginning point for a search to lay blame. Or praise, for that matter.

At base, I am a pragmatist. My concern about too much distancing between language and reality is how it can undermine our self-confidence to see, act, be in the present day. Language is a malleable tool.

If you consider the power of oration—a really charismatic speaker communicating with passionate language—all the thought-forms that clutter up the space between I and thou, between giving and receiving, can disappear. We are moved or we are not moved, we are unified as a group sharing language-powered reality, or we are fragmented by the same means. We can use language (both in the sense of words and in the sense of ideas) to gather or disperse. We do these things, in a participatory way, every day.

MB: The symbols, syllabics, texture, notes, sounds and syntax of our language-of-choice are tools to create or design a trigger, *aide memoire* or key into the reader's, listener's or observer's landscape of imagination. I began thinking of this as I read James sakej Henderson's (Mikmaw) essay on First Nations place names. I misread his phrase "paysage interieur" to mean "gaining passage into the interior of the mind." I thought—what a wonderful description of poetry. The poet creates triggers which flow into a reader's imagination. These are, of course, unique to each reader; one phrase may transport a reader to a wondrous landscape, while the same phrase may be completely oblique to another reader.

My goal as a poet, artist, and independent scholar is to create, in varied media, an ecopoetics which hopefully inspires a deep respect for water on the reader's interior landscape, so that it manifests as healthy behaviour on the exterior landscape. Blue Ecology is meant to offer a water-first ecological framework. I fear that my audience is one or two generations down the road, however.

RW: I would agree that language is about language—and that we need to remain attentive to how language works as language. Without this, it is too easy to "cloak" or forget both our own situatedness, contingency, precariousness, as well as the inflatedness and fallibility of those who would speak for us (and everyone else—hello

Site C Damn). The latter urgently needs deconstruction, while the former might be what keeps one's language ethical, in relationship "with" rather than "over." Drawing attention to language's constructedness, its limits, its artifices, has been an influential line of thought to me as well.

That said, I also refuse to give up on the eARTh (or for David Abram the eairth that he suggests we are deep within, not merely perched atop). Because it is the ground I walk on (and write on), and because, as Joanne points out, it feeds my confidence, the energy that pulses through us when we do gather, listen, reconstitute a bit differently in companionship.

JA: I guess I would add that language cloaks and reveals: as a unilingual english speaker, I have to trust that some part of what another is translating for me carries the import and intent of the original author, even as I may have questions—did the writer say (mean) mankind, humankind, womankind, all sentient beings?

I think the immediacy of human experience is something that we can trust, even though many languages, lands, epochs of unfolding co-exist, and any two people may react wholly differently to any one image or given.

RW: I'm wondering if I need to backtrack a little bit to where we think language comes from. In her essay, "Land Speaking," Jeannette Armstrong suggests that for her, language "was given to us by the land we live within." She writes, "I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time."

To me, this isn't necessarily about language "connecting" us to the earth, as you put it, Roger, so much as how language is not just what people invent (as though it made them superior, when arguably, we just don't understand or listen to the language of various animals, or even that of the wind or ocean, as it carries both life and toxins to and from us), but what people *inherit*. Language may arise from an interaction between the human and the nonhuman. For instance, let's take a Chinese character for tree—it mimics the shape of a tree. Does that word exist because some smart human saw it and made the character up, or is it a word that is somehow co-created by both the tree and the viewer of the tree? Could the word exist without the tree? And by that, I don't mean that words are referential (though I realize it may sound like that), but more that language is not just something we make up in our heads—it arises from our

experiences in the world, the cultural and geographic contexts we're immersed within. With the onslaught of industrialization, migrations, and colonization, no wonder there's plenty of dissonance and alienation from language, as there also is from the land. I do think there is often (not always) a striving or a desire to reconnect, somehow, perhaps fragmentedly or unconsciously, that often gets channelled into the too-small confines of one's own residence as four walls, when really, that residence can be imagined as much larger, even as large as a planet, potentially. How big is here? How long is now? And how well equipped are different languages to articulate or gesture toward a long now, or a big here?

3. Hope

RF: Peter does not have hope. In his statement, he writes that the question that is most pressing is "how to live"—how to carry on in the absence of "utopian possibility." Rita, on the other hand, refers to a "necessary" hope, and I wonder if this is also what helps poetics "navigate a relationship to action," as she puts it elsewhere. Christine, also, is "encouraged" by the movement. My own statement/position carries faint traces of hope; in other places, though, I have argued quite strongly against hope (I once wrote that hope "was the second most valuable commodity on the planet, just after a safe place to do business"). That was not in the context of a discussion of ecopoetics, though, and I'm thinking about why my feelings about this subject change in this new context.

But in thinking about more this, I was reminded of an essay in *Orion* by deep green philosopher Derrick Jensen, where he writes:

A WONDERFUL THING happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place. You realize that giving up on hope didn't kill you. It didn't even make you less effective. In fact it made you more effective, because you ceased relying on someone or something else to solve your problems—you ceased hoping your problems would somehow get solved through the magical assistance of God, the Great Mother, the Sierra Club, valiant tree-sitters, brave salmon, or even the Earth itself—and you just began doing whatever it takes to solve those problems yourself.

So, my question: does ecologically-informed struggle/writing/thought require hope? Or is hope a symptom of the very system, or worldview, that has brought us to the brink of ecological collapse?

JA: I see hope on one side of a spectrum of emotion and despair on the other, and we wobble between the two; our experiences are rarely fully one or the other. But those aren't the only emotions, hey, there is rage and indignation and joy and all sorts of human response to situations, within and without.

PC: Well, I love the Jensen quote and would try to honour it, and as much as I'm an animal I can count on a reptile optimism of the will to carry me forward. And I would hate to think my dog, say, knew the way I felt and gave her no impression beyond a comparative lack of energy. I own a front for her benefit—for the benefit of the neighbourhood—of someone confidently happy and accompanied on the land, but the mindful primate mind can't always stop clocking over the possibilities and they come up short. I think I always felt this way, but the latest phase of my adulthood was to be made conscious by historical events of the limitless degree of human denial and susceptibility to fear. There is literally no end to it. The powers that be—who as far as I can tell don't see much beyond the next couple of years—are perfectly content to drive us all off of a cliff if they think there's a quarter at the bottom of it. And they have mastered fear in ways we haven't begun to grasp. So perhaps an interim role would be less to fight fear than to re-direct it, bleed it out.

RW: Hmmmm, hope may not be necessary, in that, as Derrick Jensen points out, one can continue acting without hope, just because one needs to be and do as one is. It could be likened to proceeding without guarantees, to borrow a phrase from Stuart Hall. The Jensen quote points us toward self-reliance rather than relying on others to solve problems for us. Yes, and at the same time, the problems are too big for us to solve alone, so we continue to talk and meet and learn and maybe even organize, in whatever small ways we can. What's the alternative? Maybe stubbornness is more relevant to my concerns than hope.

Cracks in the pavement may just get paved over again. But weeds will keep growing, irrepressibly. Is that hope? I'm not sure.

Perhaps continuing to gesture to what matters, even if we don't know how to get there,

is more important than having hope or not having hope. But I do know that for the time being, hope helps me (a bit) to keep doing that. I don't think there is only one path; in fact, I think many paths are needed, with or without hope.

The need to distinguish between false hope and hope grounded in one's actual situations is what's given rise to books like Heather Rogers' *Green Gone Wrong* (which I've started but haven't yet finished reading). I'm not into false hope, but I am into looking for where the various cracks might widen, strategically.

MB: Hope is in the ecosystems. I am very hopeful in nature's (Earth Mother's) resiliency; however, for humankind it is a temporal question. The spatial stories are playing out every day: melting arctic/Antarctic ice, drying aquifers, BP oil spill, etc. How much time, how much relevancy does humankind have within the current social, economic and environmental models?

I am very hopeful and thus dedicate a good chunk of my life to the topic of water and traditional ecological knowledge, etc. I believe that future generations will not have our luxury of time to think things carefully through. So, I offer options and theories, as well as some entertainment, as foundational thought for future generations who will be faced with the urgency of making shifts in humankind's epistemological, social, environmental, and economic systems.

JA: I'm inclined to share that view that hope is demonstrable, observable, a fact of life, one of the givens—and that resilience is a fact of life, a quality we can nourish and strengthen in ourselves and in others.

I am not sure about distinguishing between hope and false hope. What inspires hope is very random, as Michael discussed in relation to the making of art. What is true or false is I guess about how each one assesses probabilities at any given time. How can we understand the possibilities of a vision, until the ground has been built up beneath it, and it has been fully realized?

I guess false hope could be grounded in wrong-headedness, motivated by intentional deception (this path will not lead to that outcome) or by a world-view that has few agreeing parties, but a voice that shares a worldview that is different, uncommon so far, is not of necessity false, is it?

Michael, I don't think that your ideas' audiences are a few generations down the road; the possibility for every land-centric perspective to shift into a water-centric perspective mode is right under our hands, sitting right beside us at every moment, because it is a shift in ways of seeing, not a landbridge that needs to be built by hand.

MB: Poignant, Joanne—from fear arises hope. Your spectrum description is apt, as the duality forced by categorizing or classifying obscures the nuances of the situation. Where are we on the spectrum anchored on one side by sleeping despair, and on the other by the hummingbird of hope? Hope requires fear.

RW: Thanks for the helpful comments, Joanne. I should clarify that when I mention "false hope," I'm thinking of the idea that someone else (more powerful, like Obama or James Cameron) will solve our problems for us. They most likely won't. I'm also thinking about how such an idea can lead to complacency, irresponsibility, distraction, etc. Sorry if I wasn't clear about that. And in the context of Heather Rogers (whose book is subtitled "How Our Economy is Undermining the Environmental Revolution"), making this tentative re-assessment of hope's sources would mean realizing that recycling, using energy-efficient light bulbs or whatever small green things we do are fine but not enough. We won't be able to consume our way out of this mess/crisis.

I wasn't thinking about voices who share "a worldview that is different, uncommon so far," for that is where I do find hope sometimes, actually. Small scale, widely dispersed.

And I appreciate Michael's points about the temporal—I don't know how much time future generations will have (or not), but I do know that the economic model this society is held hostage to is way too short-sighted when it values a ten-year mine (with temporary jobs) over thousands of years of pollution that might never get "remediated." And people's attention spans seem to be getting shorter and things getting faster, when more thinking through the long now is urgently needed. Can poetry intervene in that? I once wrote "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow takes me back hundreds of years"—could it take us forward at the same time?