

# Editorial Epilogue

(or: *the sound of a raindrop rolling down a fern frond and into the eye of a fool*)

Although I have been nominated by the Editorial Collective to compose an editorial counterpoint to this year's journal - to offer some sort of synthesis concerning the impulse, energy and vision that went into its compilation - I can hardly hope to articulate singly what has been above all a collective process, other than noting that it has been rather fun. To tell the truth, I don't even remember quite how it all got started, beyond arriving late at the first editorial meeting and discovering (in one of the year's best surprises) that everyone present was, like myself, in some way interested in the confluence of narratives and 'environmental' knowledge. Whatever the beginning, it quickly became apparent that each editor (not to mention each contributor, each reader) had a significantly different take on what this year's theme might really be all about. That said, it nevertheless falls to me to reflect a little bit on what this whole 'Other Ways of Telling' thing is all about, and what possible relevance this seemingly oddball collection of prose, poetry, essay and artwork might have toward the field of environmental studies. To be honest, I have no idea how to write an editorial essay - I hardly ever read them. But details like that should never stand in the way.

**I** recently read an article written by a well known novelist who admitted that she still felt sheepish about referring to herself as a 'poet.' Poetry, it seems, is nowadays largely cause for embarrassment as opposed to celebration, (em-bare-ass-ment: the word is itself a poem, or at least one waiting to happen). Although I cannot remember them all here, the comment is only one in a noticeable deluge of recent quips from writers, artists, performers, philosophers; in short, storytellers of neopolitan flavours, who have stated, with variable eloquence and forthrightness, the same thing: we (as in we North Americans) do not seem, on the whole, to hold some forms of creative expression in very high esteem (Deluge: the word is itself a poem, or at least one waiting to happen).

Hardly one of the 'creative' pieces you will read herein came without some sort of 'cook's apology.' "*It's just something I do for fun on the side,*" or "*It's not really very good, but I thought it might fit, so...*" Many of the pieces actually had to be aggressively solicited by the editors, as people we knew to be potential contributors were often initially reluctant to submit. I cannot be certain, yet one suspects that aside from the fact that people are generally just beautifully humble beings (and also a bit lazy), part of this has to do with the way self-expression is often received in a North American context. The urge to dream or fictionalize is all-too-regularly scoffed at, singing aloud is likely to convince people in shopping malls that one is insane, and acts of poetics are far-too-rarely celebrated, supported, or encouraged openly. Of course, people do not stop taking photos, making elegant napkin drawings, or writing journals and poetry, and the constant consumption of novels, movies and music makes obvious the need for imaginative sustenance. We just don't tend to advertise, often preferring to keep our heads down; the poetic impulse, so fragile in its fledgling forms, mostly held underground for the sake of peace of mind (perhaps this helps explain why more people write than sing; it's quieter, and you can actually do it in public). When certain persistent (even bloody-minded) personalities do learn through some accident of inclination and opportunity to express themselves overtly, even well, we tend to regard them as different from ourselves, either ascribing them a certain 'otherness' or expertise out of odd reverence, or perhaps just deciding that they are weird. Thus, the act of creative expression, which is supposed to be about communication and community (emphasis on the root 'commune'), can actually become twisted into a source of social fragmentation, when we all could be dreaming out loud.

I for one would tend to side with Wendell Berry<sup>1</sup> when he notes that there isn't (or ought not to be) anything particularly special about poets, artists, writers, in terms of having the market on imaginative knowledge cornered. Talents and opportunities may vary, it is true, but one must question the assumption that there is anything particularly 'other' about the artist's perception that doesn't potentially rest in the minds and hearts of multitudes. Believing so merely carries us farther away from the possibility of understanding their messages as meaningful within the context of our immediate lives, and precludes, aside from rare exceptions, the emergence of our own messages. Creative impulse, narrative knowledge, the appreciation of story and beauty: these things flow within each and every one of us (unless we are convinced to twist a knob and shut off the tap), and the 'creative genius' as expert is just the manifestation of another odd hierarchy of knowledge: a forced specialization in what a society obsessed with the preeminent authority of rational thought can easily sweep into a dusty basement museum display case, dutifully catalogued and labeled 'AESTHETICS.'

Given such a trend, perhaps the recent surge of interest in narrative and poetics, currently quite evident within the human and social sciences in general (and, yes, lately critical environmental studies), might be regarded as something of a small and welcome miracle. Certainly miraculous is the tenacity of the creative impulse in people who are instructed daily that it isn't worth all that much - tenacity evident in the number of creative pieces which are submitted yearly to UnderCurrents, and which we have taken an opportunity this year to emphasize. Just a note, then, of encouragement to everyone who exposed themselves enough to send us some work this year, even those of you who kind of wanted to but didn't - even those out there who don't care if anyone else ever sees or hears the gears of their imagining. Whether it got into print or not (and there was a lot of decent stuff that didn't), the dream-like mind itself is worth a little bit o' celebration.

2 *Other Ways of Telling*: The phrase is weighty, dense with implication (or maybe merely dense); just a hint at the potential complexity might be in order. This is a bit of a cheap trick, I admit, but that shall not deter me...

Other ways of telling?

Ways of telling other?

Telling ways of other?

Ways of other(s) telling?

Telling of other ways?

Telling others of ways?

Others telling of ways?

Already I have gone too far....

3 Narrative ~ *a fancy name for stories. A means of ordering people, things and events, thereby creating meaning. Derived from the Indo-European 'gna' (not to be confused with 'gnaw'), meaning 'to tell' or 'to know.'*

Hayden White<sup>2</sup> notes that narrative might be considered a solution to a general human concern; namely, the problem of how to translate knowing into telling. In tapping the root meaning of the word itself, the inseparability of knowledge and expression is made clear. To offer an extreme generality, the theme of this year's issue of *UnderCurrents* operates on at least two basic levels. In one respect, 'Other Ways of Telling' has been compiled in order to draw attention to the place of narrative modes and theory (in other words, storytelling of all types) within the production of contemporary and historical environmental knowledge, and to simply provide a sanctioned space for story to relate what only story can. On the other hand, what you have been reading as 'Other Ways of Telling' could just as easily have been called 'Other Ways of Knowing.'

4 *The duende is not in the throat, it surges up from the soles of the feet. It is of blood, of ancient culture, of creative action. It calls one out.*  
- Federico Garcia Lorca<sup>3</sup>

O, but Poetry is a Demon. The duende of which this dead poet speaks is none other than the Spanish daemon or spirit of creativity; that earthly essence or quality which Lorca knew intimately as the dark sound of roots pushing into soil - the dancer's rhythm, and the poet's vitriol. Such explanation may seem unnecessarily opaque, unless we realize that poetry, in whatever manifestation, is about that which is essentially un-nameable: that which precedes language, and what hides in the space between words. Gaston Bachelard has written that "[t]he great function of poetry is to give us back the situations of our dreams." The duende is not in the throat because it is an impulse and a dream; a mainline to a form of knowledge more deeply embedded in the subconscious skin and the blood than the intellect; an impulse such as that which curls up out of the floor to entwine the legs and arms and spine, driving the Flamenco dancer to step beyond technique, transcend the cold precision of style, and infuse movement with the flushing thrash of bleating hearts.

5 *"It is unfortunate...that those in the environmental sciences are assumed to be the logical choice as advocates in the environmental movement. In fact, many of the most significant arguments cannot be handled by their lexicon...It's no good passing the buck to ecologists - environmentalism involves the perception of values, and values are the coin of the arts. Environmentalism without aesthetics is merely regional planning."*<sup>4</sup>

These words, written twenty years ago by environmental philosopher Neil Evernden, may be every bit as relevant today as they were when they first appeared. And they lie at the heart of this Tenth Anniversary Issue of *UnderCurrents*. Indeed, something does seem to have changed since the days of alchemy and wonder, when scientific, spiritual and poetic understandings were openly fused, locked at the lips, inseparable partners in imaginative procreation. These days, the place of story, the telling of experience, is largely consigned to the margins of authority, while environmental decision-making, in particular, is dominated almost exclusively by the language of management science. The sacred kiss has broken with a bite, and blood; like Joe Friday would have said: "Just the facts, Ma'am. That's quite a story." But interdisciplinarity entails by its very nature the mingling of patterns of understanding heretofore regarded as separate, and it is hoped that the interdisciplinary nature of these works will contest the fragmentation which has caused storytelling and environmental understanding to become categorized as two different things.

6 *"In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them...We live stories that either give our lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives."*<sup>5</sup>

William Blake once said that you have to create your own system if you wish to avoid becoming enslaved by somebody else's. To do this, one must become personally skilled in constituting reality. Perhaps one of the principle challenges facing those wishing to contest the contemporary one-sidedness of environmental discourse is to become not only skilled critics, but also storytellers - skilled performers and interpreters motivated to contest the fragmentation of environmental

knowledge on a narrative level. To become skilled in constituting reality is to be empowered to explore changing meanings and shifting perception in a mode which might even reach outside the traditional halls of academe...and wouldn't that be something?

The essays, poetry and prose, artwork and photography which you will find between these pages are all chapters in what I would like to think of as a much larger work-in-progress: the re-assertion of the role of the storyteller in the context of a community of environmental concern. For the most part, these works have come from participants within the community which is the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University. Those that do not have been included here because they have been humbly judged as relevant to that community, and because they were really quite good. Some of them have little to do with what has traditionally fallen under the wing of Environmental Studies. Yet each piece speaks in its own way about the ripples of storied meaning that have influenced certain members of this community of students and educators in doing what they do, whether scholastically or personally (and what, after all, is the difference?).

## 7 (Something of an Aside pertaining to The Sensuality of Small Things with Exo-skeletons)

zumbad sobre	buzz above
los dones de la tierra,	the earth's endowments,
familia de oro,	family of gold,
multitud del viento,	multitude of the wind,
sacudid el incendio	shake the fire
de las flores,	from the flowers,
la sed de los estambres,	thirst from the stamens,
el agudo	the sharp,
hilo	aromatic
de olor	thread
que reune los días,	that stitches together the days,
y propagad	and propagate
la miel	honey,
sobrepasando	passing over
los continentes humedos, las islas	humid continents, the most
mas lejanas del cielo	distant islands of the
del oeste.	western sky.

- Pablo Neruda, 'Ode to Bees'<sup>6</sup>

In emphasizing the telling of stories, this issue of *UnderCurrents* has decidedly taken a swing toward the 'cultural' side of environmental studies. Storytelling is, after all, primarily a fact of human culture, and of community; indeed, storytelling has been called the most human of acts. Yet neither story nor community culture are necessarily species-specific. Honey bees have been recorded enacting elaborate aerial ballets in imitation of the pitch of local landscapes. These dances are performed by scouting workers in order to communicate the location of a new food source to the entire hive. The motions of the bee's bodies relate measured spatial facts in the form of what can easily be interpreted as both a story and a map. Facts of local topography are connected into a whole whose meaning extends well beyond fact; the imminence of hunger and the desirability of food. This means of expression would by any human comparison be regarded as an unquestionably sensual and abstract act of interpretive theatrics, motivated by bodily and emotional need.

In other words: by what is perhaps not an unreasonable stretch of the imagination, bees are capable of poetry. If we are foolish enough to ignore the validity of poetic expression, the bees may have one up on us.

## 8 "The ancient Egyptians believed the seat of the soul was in the tongue: the tongue was a rudder or steering oar with which a man [sic] steered his course through the world."<sup>7</sup>

Each piece you will read herein tells with a voice. Each voice, in telling, speaks a world into being; the world of a person inscribing her- or him-self as a ripple on the pool of history. As you read these selections, take them in with critical eyes, questioning minds; but above all, ingest them with pleasure. Read, watch, speak words aloud, and in doing so, take the experiences of others under your skin. In listening, become complicit in the telling of stories; navigate the meandering currents of the River of All Tales, and be not afraid of drowning when the horizons you drift toward suddenly dissemble, reforming in rainbows from fragments of mist. All that is needed to stay afloat is a willingness to hear. Be detractors, delimiters, deconstructors if you will; be 'environmentalists' if you want (En-vire-on-mental-ist: the word is itself a poem, or at least one waiting to happen). But beware of what Gaston Bachelard once said: "Nobody knows that in reading we are re-living our temptations to be a poet."<sup>8</sup>

## 9 Whatever else, bee poets.

Yours truly,  
Angus Leech, and the 1997/98 *UnderCurrents* Editorial Collective

## Notes

1. Wendel Berry, *Standing by Words*, San Francisco, North Point Press, 1983.
2. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in: *On Narrative*, W.J.T. Mitchell editor, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981.
3. This excerpt from Lorca is re-quoted from Nick Bantock's book *The Forgetting Room* (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto, 1997). More about the duende may be discovered in a transcribed lecture by Lorca entitled "Theory and Function of the Duende," in: *Selected Poems*, translated by Merryn Williams, Newcastle (UK), Bloodaxe Books, 1992.
4. Neil Evernden, "Beyond Ecology: Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy," in: C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1996.
5. Ben Okri, *A Way of Being Free*, London, Phoenix House, 1997.
6. This is a fragment of a longer poem taken from *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda*, translated and introduced by Margaret Sayers Peden, London, University of California Press, 1990.
7. Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, New York, Penguin Books, 1987.
8. Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, translated from French by Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964.

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## BIOGRAPHIES

Christine Beevis has just finished building her first cedar strip canoe after a year of gruelling work, and wonders how long it will take her to complete her Masters degree in Environmental Studies.

Mia Biasucci regularly entertains delusions of grandeur in and about the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University.

Emily Chan is studying how environmentalism, framed by communities of color, contrasts that of the mainstream movement, in an analysis of environmental activism in America. The photo of Tai O island was taken during her second-ever visit to Hong Kong.

Danny Ciraco is a joint LLB/MES student who is focusing his studies in alternative dispute resolution and negotiations. His interest in body language stems from his desire to dissect the vast spectrum of the negotiation process.

Joanna Fine is completing her Masters degree in Environmental Studies at York University, and trying to make sense of the world through her cooking.

Mark Haslam is a Toronto television producer and screenwriter who dabbles in still photography. His favorite subjects are trees and cows.

Sean Kane is Professor of Cultural Studies at Trent University where he teaches theoretical ecology and oral literature. The piece, especially the first part, is abbreviated from his *Wisdom of the Myhteller* (Broadview Press) which is used as a textbook in many universities across the U.S. and Canada.

Angus Leech is currently pursuing his Masters of Environmental Studies degree at the Faculty of Environmental Studies. Furthermore, he has already said too much.

Lynn Liscio is dreaming of canoeing as she completes a Masters degree in Environmental Studies at York University.

It would be inappropriate to tell you anything about Steph MacLaren, you'll have to experience her for yourself. She'll be there - silent of course - NOT!

Naturally, Andrew MacDonald kneads bread to eat - wye? He says it's just a sense of sublime, of rivers wyld and gastronomic bliss. Un dia le gusteria saberal pan como una carta abierta de la tierra.

Zabe can usually trying to balance the range of activities in her life which take her from remote wilderness areas to York University campus. She is completing a PhD on how we relate to the land through making things.

Ian MacRae is still living in Toronto and goes to spanish language films with Gabriel once a month.

Chanda Meek is currently in her third year of entanglement with the MES beast. She hails from the fair state of Washington in the belly of the capitalist monstrosity otherwise known as the United States of America. She loves to travel, meet intriguing characters and occasionally put it down on paper.

Anuja Mendiratta is on a sojourn to Toronto from a small village in Ohio. Her poetry has been published in several journals and in the Sister Vision Anthology, *The Very Inside*. In the near future she hopes to co-habit with an orange Canadian cat, who will undoubtedly inspire further writing and other creative mischief.

Emma Rhodes is an Osgoode Hall law student who likes to take photographs to keep sane.

Lisa Richardson has recently completed her Masters degree in Environmental Studies at York University.

Sanjeevan Sathiyamoorthy is an educator at heart. Although he most enjoys teaching and learning through games, he likes the struggle of trying out other ways of sharing ideas. His contribution to this journal is one such attempt.