Towards an Anarchist Ecology

Knowing the Land is Resistance

2014-01

Introduction

We are settlers on this land, raised in cities, rootless, and alienated from the ecosystems we can't help but be part of. But we want to unlearn what we have been taught by the dominant culture, and in the process, we want to re-learn joy, connection, and wonder, while embracing grief and loss in order to heal. We want to decolonize, and to do this, we need to build a new kind of relationship with the land. We want to take steps towards an anarchist ecology, towards a knowledge of the land that is anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian.

This introduction is the beginning of a seven-part series offering some ideas of what an anarchist ecology might be. The other parts will be released throughout April, this exciting springtime month of high water, busy birds, swelling buds, open windows, and wanderlust. We hope these words will compliment the re-birth and inspiration that this season brings you.

Towards an Anarchist Ecology – it's a provocative phrase, but what does it mean? Let's start by looking at each of these terms separately before we consider their meaning together.

Ecology is the study of interconnectedness in natural communities. It's the way different plants, creatures, and forces interact with each other to create the conditions for the whole ecosystem. It is also the way they collaborate to bring about succession, the process by which one ecosystem gives way towards another. Succession is also a process of resiliency, towards more diversity and greater health. Theoretically, succession eventually reaches a climax community, which is a rich, stable ecosystem that self-perpetuates. However, climax ecosystems are in reality interconnected with systems of healthy disturbances like fire and wind, as well as impacted by human destruction. And so succession is constantly ongoing and all the various stages of succession are present in wild communities.

In our region, the northern-most edge of the Carolinian zone, between Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment, the climax community is often characterized by the association of Sugar Maple and Beech – can you picture that tall, spacious canopy filtering green sunlight down to the soft leaf-littered ground and an understory of Ironwood, Blue Beech, Choke Cherry, and Pagoda Dogwood? Other climax communities around here are the Oak Savannah, now one of the world's most endangered ecosystems, and the Oak-Hickory forest. Both of these are abundant food forests that sustained the Chonnonton (Neutral), Onandawaga (Seneca), and Misi-zaagiing (Mississauga) peoples whose traditional territory this land is.

We use the word **anarchist** in the sense of anti-authoritarian, emphasizing the need to challenge the authoritarian tendencies of mainstream ecology, or, as we call it, dominator ecology. Although this is our first time using the word anarchist as the KLR collective, we do identify strongly with anarchy and like organizing within anarchist (and anarchistic) spaces. The clear rejection of the state's authority

by anarchists is a vital step in the process of decolonization. As Mel Bazil, of the Gixsan and Wet'su'weten nations said in a talk at the Victoria Anarchist Bookfair, "Anarchists have stepped away from colonial constructs by asserting that no one is more qualified to live your own life than you."

And the word **'towards'** – this is perhaps the most important part of our title. We are not offering clear answers here, and we aren't speaking authoritatively. We are hoping simply to offer some hints and starting points for building an anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial process of knowing the land. There are lots of folks around who have more experience in this than we do, especially in Indigenous communities. The ideas we will outline here are based on the efforts of our collective, in the three years of its existence, to build and share such a knowledge. We draw from our experience of having offered more than thirty workshops in communities throughout the region and from the different perspectives and ways of knowing we encountered in our travels.

'Towards' also reminds us that both decolonization and connecting with the land are ongoing processes. Just as there will never be a point when we can stop unlearning and struggling against colonial constructs, there will never be a time when the living earth will stop filling us with wonder, turning all that we know into a thousand more questions. We want to let go off this idea of arriving at some point at which we no longer need to strive.

In this series, we will offer five starting points for cultivating an anarchist ecology, and we will also take some time to define dominator ecology. Here's a short summary of the six articles to follow:

- **Dominator Ecology**: Mainstream ecology is deeply colonial and frequently acts at the service of political institutions and corporations. We want to dismiss the practice of dominator ecology, how and why it does what it does, without dismissing many of its insights and findings. We also want to speak honestly about the role dominator ecology plays in the destruction of the wild and ongoing colonization.
- **Rooted in Relationships:** When we talk about knowing the land, we are talking about building a relationship with the land. This involves radical interconnectivity, engagement, reading the land's history, and cultivating joy and humility.
- **Deep Listening:** Like in any good relationship, we will get to know the land using deep listening, which means reconnecting with our senses, being open to tragic realities, and resisting the easy answers of appropriating spiritual practices.
- **Urban Ecology:** The wild is everywhere, and land in cities is just as important to the health of our watersheds as are conservation areas. We will also explore how the health of human communities and the health of the land are linked by the power dynamics that harm each of them, such as gentrification,

industrialism, and industrial collapse.
- **Re-enchanting:** How can we make our passions contagious? How can we spread a decolonizing practice of knowing the land? What issues of access to wild spaces exist, and how can we break those barriers?
- **Un-expert-ness:** The idea of expertise is one of the big ways we're kept from connecting with the land and kept alienated from our own experience, as if we're not qualified to notice what is around us. As well, the pressure of 'being an expert' can stifle our own growth by making it hard to ask questions and be vulnerable. How can we cultivate non-hierarchical knowledge?

We'll be publishing two essays a week for the rest of the month, and we want this process to be interactive! If you like what you're reading, or you have questions, considerations, ideas, or challenges that you'd like us to address, please let us know. You can reach us by email at knowingtheland(at)gmaill(dot)com, find us on facebook as knowingtheland isresistance, or post a comment on this website.

We took on this project of putting down some ideas towards an anarchist ecology because we wanted to learn more and discuss them, so we're really, *really* looking forward to hearing from you!

A Look At Dominator Ecology

Over the past few years, we've learned we're not alone in being fed-up with the type of ecological knowledge and discourse in the dominant culture. Lots of people question the perspectives towards the land that are spread through the mass media, upheld in the academy, and are readily funded. Though the intention of this series is to offer some starting points for an anarchist ecology, we would like to take some time to describe what it is that we seek to avoid.

The study of ecology in this society is, perhaps unsurprisingly, is a deeply colonial and oppressive practice that has and continues to serve the interests of the powerful, usually at the expense of Indigenous communities. We call this 'dominator ecology'. This is the ecology of management from a distance, and of remote expertise, that sees itself as fundamentally separate from the land, inhabiting a present without a past or future.

One of our collective members refers to herself light-heartedly as a "recovering academic biologist" and recalls how she and her fellow classmates worked in that field with the intention of doing good, of helping the environment and healing the earth. However, as many of you probably know, there are few professional paths into that work, and even those require ethical compromises.

We don't want to dismiss the knowledge that comes out of the mainstream, or deny that it has motivated and supported some really good projects at certain moments. We want to dismiss the practice of dominator ecology, how and why

it does what it does, without dismissing many of its insights and findings. Most settlers do not have access to traditional knowledge, so we'd rather learn about things like pollinator associations or bird migration through dominator ecology than not know them at all. We also want to speak honestly about the role dominator ecology plays in the destruction of the wild and in ongoing colonization.

We want to offer a clear critique so that we can better cultivate other ways of knowing. How does dominator ecology uphold power? How does it contribute to ongoing colonialism? How does it keep us alienated from the land? How is it motivated and funded?

Let's begin with this quote from *The Living Great Lakes* by Jerry Dennis about the beginnings of the formal science of ecology, describing how white settlers finally figured out the existence of succession:

> "In the late nineteenth century, a young professor of biology named Henry Chandler Cowles approached the Indiana Dunes as if it were a living laboratory. While studying the pioneering of the land by plant communities, he observed that dunes evolved from barren sand near the shore to ridges of pioneer grasses to hills of shrubs and trees and finally to climax forests. The plants that lived on the sand, he discovered, grew in predictable patterns, with marram and sand reed grasses first, followed by red osier dogwood and sand cherry and cottonwood, then maple, oak, and pine.
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> "Others before Henry Cowles had recognized that the Indiana Dunes were a dynamic ecosystem, with land forms and microclimates supporting more plan diversity per acre than in any other national park in the United States. But where others had seen only hills of sand and an interesting variety of plants, Cowles saw centuries of ecological progress compressed into distinct zones only a few hundred feet apart. In 1899, when he published his observations in a report, *The Ecological Relationships of the Vegetations of the Sand Dunes of Lake Michigan*, it sent a shock wave through the scientific world. Cowles had demonstrated for the first time that plant communities succeed one another, each serving as the foundation for those to come, while simultaneously creating the conditions for its own collapse. This concept of the interrelationship of organisms was revolutionary and it changed the way people looked at the natural world. Some historians now mark Cowles' paper as the beginning of the science of ecology."

Despite this passage claiming that Cowles had "demonstrated for the first time," he was obviously not the first person to realize that succession existed. Odawa and Ojibwe peoples had been living in that area for countless generations, over

thousands of years, holding an intimate relationship with the land, but that is all ignored in this telling.

The passage also suggests that this discovery by Cowles was "revolutionary", but it's important to look at that claim more closely. Certainly there continues to be huge potential for a wider awareness of such awe-inspiring findings to create revolutionary change. But we have to remember that this so-called discovery of succession took place within colonial institutions. This close relationship between the science of ecology and those power structures means its potential to create change is easily co-opted.

Perhaps the author uses the term 'revolutionary' to describe the ensuing efforts by settler naturalists to insert the science of ecology into the political decision-making process. It took the political and economic elites sixty years of escalating ecological catastrophe and increasing anger within settler communities to recognize the recuperative potential of dominator ecology. The publication of *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson, is often presented as a tipping-point of public opinion and the emergence of the modern environmental movement.

To recuperate a struggle – for example, anger against massive population declines of many species of birds and amphibians due to pesticide use – means to take a situation that threatens to go beyond the ability of politicians to control and to bring it back within the realm of democratic discourse as a means of pacifying it. This recuperation has spawned a whole industry of environmental assessment, and destructive development projects compete with each other to include the most trees in their parking lots, or to fund improvements to hiking trails while continuing to profit from quarries that poison that same watershed.

To more clearly understand the practice of dominator ecology, we want to consider:

What are the questions asked?
What are the tools used?
What kinds of answers are valued?
What kinds of lessons are drawn from those answers?
And at whose service is all this done?

Tomorrow we will post the second half of this look at dominator ecology, answering these questions one by one. For today though, we would like to close with a quote from the publication Lèse-Béton, translated as Breaking Concrete. It is published from participants in the Zone à Défendre struggle in western France, preventing the construction of an airport, in what is currently the largest land defense struggle in Europe. The following is the text of a letter to an environmental assessment firm called Biotope that was delivered when some resistors broke into their offices:

> "Biotope and its employees are playing a large role in giving, voluntarily or not, ecological legitimacy to this project and to its promoters.

> "It's not too late to oppose what a handful of tecnocrats have decided will be our future. It's not too late for a few gears in the machine to take responsibility and refuse to be accomplices to this catastrophe. You can't prevent a project from happening while you're under contract from its promoters – pretending the opposite is cowardly and in bad faith, with no other goal than to hide your own responsibility from yourself. You conveniently forget to see the consequences: refuse to obey, refuse to play the game of these impact studies that everyone can see are inexcusable from an ecological point of view.
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> "It's probably fun to count the little birds, the great crested newts, and the reptiles, to wander through the forest or to inventory the wetlands in an idyllic landscape… Except we don't want your inventory, we don't need your expertise and we don't need you to "manage our living environment", no matter what you or some elite leaders might think.
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> "It's naive to hope to awaken an ecological glimmer in the hearts of our leaders or in the boardrooms of Vinci. We want to depend only on ourselves, this is why we will oppose any advance of this project – whether it takes the hypocritical guise of an environmental assessment or whether it shows itself openly as it really is: massively rejected by the population and advanced only with the support of an army of police."

So! We've already talked about dominator ecology as a practice that is deeply colonial and often co-opting and recuperative of environmental struggle.

To more clearly understand the practice of dominator ecology, let's consider some questions about it:

What are the questions asked?
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What are the questions asked? What is the safe level of arsenic or cesium in a waterway? When will a certain population of fish collapse? How can we mitigate the effects of fertilizer runoff? How do we manage this woodlot for maximum productivity? The questions asked by dominator ecology take the needs of the economy as primary. Modern industrial techno-civilization is the assumption behind the questions it asks, and the wild then becomes a variable to be managed. Often, even if an ecological study's questions are well intentioned, their findings will be used to justify certain levels of destruction anyways.

What are the tools used? Cells under microscopes, genetic mapping, soil and water laboratory tests, radio tracking bands on the legs of birds, satellite arrays

for measuring global warming… The use of sophisticated technology in dominator ecology often goes unquestioned. However, the choice of tools we use in our inquiry are not determined by the inherent value of the tools themselves, but by the kinds of questions we choose to ask and the kinds of answers we decide to value. Using expensive, specialized technology means that the observations and therefore the conclusions arising from them are unverifiable for anyone who does not have access to that technology. It becomes a way of situating ecological knowledge as fundamentally out of reach of everyone but a class of professionals who usually work for universities or governments.

Scientific inquiry is, at its root, egalitarian, since it just means observation, experiment, and critical thinking. There are many ways of observing and many ways of reaching the same conclusions and developing a sophisticated knowledge of the earth. Both astronauts who sees the earth from space and traditional earth-based cultures describe an understanding of connectedness and whole-systems. What we want to bring up here is that privileging high-tech ways of knowing is one way that dominator ecology becomes authoritarian and inaccessible to most.

What kinds of answers are valued? Primarily data, statistics, and anything numerical. Dominator ecology is reductive, seeking simple causal relationships, on the cellular or chemical level if possible (privileging the use of high-tech tools). This reductiveness becomes a way to deflect blame away from destructive practices, because it is difficult to attribute a specific cause to an environmental problem, or to definitively prove that something is damaging the health of an ecosystem of watershed.

An example of this is when, in the summer of 2012, all the fish died in Hamilton's Red Hill creek, and this was followed by a brief flurry of research that all went to prove that the cause was unknown; however, this is the same Red Hill creek that recently had a massive highway built along its whole length. The degree to which such a development reduced the creek's resiliency is not quantifiable and didn't turn up in any chemical testing of the water.

In other situations, like in the case of the collapse of the commercial fishery in Lake Erie, this reductive thinking means that the causes of problems are identified very narrowly (blame the lampreys). This narrow identification of the problem then leads to managerial, short-sighted solutions (poison the creeks where the Lampreys spawn every year forever). Which leads us to…

What kinds of lessons are drawn from those answers? As we said, the questions asked by dominator ecology take the needs of the economy as given, and the answers they value are reductive and very narrowly defined. This leads to managerial answers. The natural world is viewed as just a collection of resources, and so the dynamic ecological relationships need to be understood only so far as to properly manage those resources for continued exploitation.

Dominator ecology seeks to be dispassionate, neutral, dehumanized, and so it

situates itself as essentially apart from and not deeply affected by the subject matter, which is the network of life itself. This means that those who do feel the destruction of the land on a personal level – namely Indigenous communities – are excluded from consideration because passion is considered bias, which is of course 'unscientific'. This rationale has also been used to exclude or marginalize the voices of women.

Because dominator ecology seeks to manage ecosystems, it focuses on how to act on them in the present, regardless of how much stress that system has endured over the last few hundred years. This means it seeks to understand a present moment separate from its past and without a future. To illustrate these tendencies towards dispassion and timelessness, here's a quote from an essay entitled "A Historical Perspective on High Quality Wildlife Habitats" by Ian D. Thompson, from the book, *Ontario's Old Growth Forests*:

> "Unfortunately, with each passing generation, society loses some of its ability to see or understand which habitats are superior because of cumulative changes over time across landscapes. Each succeeding generation only perceives the world as they see it, not as it once was, and unfortunately our collective memories are short. [...] in the late 1960's in Montreal, the best black duck habitat (i.e. high duck denisty and highly successful breeding) was an area southeast of the city known as Nun's Island. Nun's Island is now home to high-rise apartments and high-priced condominiums but not ducks; such has been progress in the world. [...] Now, the best black duck habitat anywhere in Quebec is elsewhere, maybe on Isle Verte, or perhaps in the boreal beaver ponds, but the black duck population is poorer for the loss.
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> "[...] when we think of grizzly bears, we think of uninhabited mountain ranges with meadows and river valleys where humans rarely travel. But if we read history, we know that grizzly bears once inhabited the great plains and foothills of Canada and the United States, where the amount of prey alone (huge herds of bison along with deer and antelope) would indicate that this habitat was far superior than the mountains to which the bears are now relegated. Humans eliminated the bears from these prime areas and so history has altered our perception of what high quality grizzly bear habitat really is."

So far, Thompson seems to offer a critique of the timelessness of dominator ecology, the separation of a situation from its past and future, and his analysis of how our understanding of high quality habitat weakens over time is quite interesting. However, his use of the ambiguous word "changes" to describe the massive campaign of genocide and destruction that continues to be waged against Turtle Island, its peoples, and its creatures foreshadows some absurd conclusions. He continues:

> "As habitats change, invariably as a result of human activity, so too do the ways animals react to and use the new habitats. It appears, at least, that most forest species in Canada are able to adapt to these changes, as no species has gone extinct solely as a result of forest management. Animals in many situations seem capable of adapting to changed habitat conditions by learning behaviours appropriate to living in the new conditions, if the change is neither too extensive nor too dramatic. On the other hand, we have not completed the first cycle of logging in Canadian forests and so it is too early to draw conclusions with respect to species survivorship in the long term. Certainly some species have not adapted well to habitats created by logging and their populations have declined as a result."

In an amazing feat of verbiage, Thomson manages to conclude that clearcuts creates habitats, animals can find ways to deal with it, and its too early to draw any other conclusions. Even when the past is considered by dominator ecology, it is looked at so narrowly that it becomes impossible to say anything meaningful, which is also a form of timelessness. This timelessness also conveniently eliminates Indigenous peoples' relationships to and knowledge of the land, and wraps the whole process of colonialism – including genocide and ecocide – into the sanitized word "changes".

And at whose service is this done? The science of ecology is not neutral – there are some serious power dynamics at play, and so the discipline itself becomes a weapon for the powerful.

Almost all environmental studies are carried out by governments (the federal or provincial ministries of Natural Resources or of the Environment), by large corporations (who seek to profit from so-called natural resources), by universities (whose work is invariably funded by both the state and the corporations, an example being the University of Guelph's cozy relationship with Monsanto), or by private environmental assessment firms who are contracted by one of the above.

Many development projects in Ontario are subject to an environmental assessment, whose purpose is to demonstrate that whatever the project is, it will either have no negative effect on the wild or that the effect can be mediated, for instance by building an artificial wetland to capture runoff from a new suburb development. Of course, this process greatly favours those able to pay for ecological expertise, who then get to choose what questions are asked and what answers are presented.

Ecological expertise is inaccessible – the financial cost of a degree or an environmental assessment is is a huge barrier, as is the narrow, professionalized discourse of the industry. Even NGOs like Greenpeace and the Sierra Club use that discourse to gain legitimacy. Those who can't afford the expertise are excluded. But even if more voices were included, dominator ecology is a rigged game from the start, because its starting assumption is that economic and industrial and civilized growth

are necessary and the wild needs to be managed to accommodate them.

Rooted in Relationships

The last few generations of settlers on Turtle Island have perhaps the weakest ever connection to the land. We can trace this disconnection back to colonization and to our presence here as settlers. So far in this series, we've identified dominator ecology with colonialism and seen how it views humans as separate from the ecosystems they live in. In cultivating an anarchist ecology then, we begin by building a real relationship with the land.

Building relationships is rooted in the idea of radical inter-connectivity. We are a part of the natural world, and our healths are tied together with those of the creatures, plants, natural systems, and rhythms of the specific places around us. Humans belong to ecosystems, we depend on habitats, we inhabit watersheds – there is no separation between us and the land.

What does it mean to have a real relationship with the land? It means we can *trust in the authority of our own experience*. Building a relationship is a powerful source of knowledge and wisdom especially in a culture that tells us to deny our own agency and to defer to experts. It also requires *engagement*, actively seeking to deepen our relationships. Trusting the authority of our own experience doesn't mean we need to be content with what little we have. It is a lifelong journey of learning, unlearning, and play.

And so we need to open ourselves to *joy and humility*. An anarchist ecology requires a playful spirit and the humility to let go of the need to know and have answers. Questions and wonders lead to more questions – our senses open to natural rhythms and we notice more details of the world around us. By emphasizing questions over answers, we deepen our relationship with the land without the baggage of being an expert.

Seeking a connection with the land also means confronting our settler identity and the carnage of colonialism. That history is written on the landscape. We cannot truly know the land without hearing its story. And when we listen, we know that the hurt is deep. This deep hurt can be scary, making it hard to break through our alienation from the natural world. Building a relationship with the land involves embracing pain and discomfort, it involves grieving. It means opening our eyes to the on-going violence of this culture and situating ourselves within it.

Relationship building is much more than identifying by name. It's about careful, close attention over time. A few years back, we found a tree that we hadn't seen before. The tree's bark was smooth and grey, with small lenticels flecked in horizontal bands. Despite the winter winds, the tree was holding tight to an amazing collection of little hanging cones and deep purple catkins closed up tight. As we

walked the frozen shoreline, we noticed more and more of these trees and saw that they enjoyed having their roots right in the marsh. And, judging by the number of neatly cut stumps, it seemed the beaver liked this tree most of all.

Returning to those shores over time, we became more and more eager to watch this tree. In spring, it was the first to drop long, yellow catkin flowers and send pollen on the wind. The small flowers develop into woody cones over the summer, and in the fall they open and release a winged seed. Much later, we came to learn it was an Alder, but even in not knowing its name we already knew so much about it. Most of the alders we know are european Alders, and they offer a pretty healthy reflection for settlers like us to think about what it means to join a forest community and contribute health and healing. Right now, we are growing hundreds of baby Alders because they are so important in adding health as nitrogen fixing trees. We excited to continue getting to know this tree.

We can't really tell you what it's like to build a relationship with the land in a theoretical essay, all we can do is describe what it involves. We could talk about watersheds, bird migration, the Nanfan treaty or the draining of the wetlands, and these are all important facts. But building a relationship is a process, an experience, and not a list of facts or conclusions.

Cultivating Deep Listening

If building relationships is the *what* that we are proposing in this series, then 'deep listening' is the *how*. Like any kind of healthy relationship, building a relationship with the land starts with listening.

In our workshops, we try to emphasize simple tools for learning to listen to the land. This involves connecting with our senses, and quieting our minds so that we can simply hear, see, smell, taste, and feel the world around us.

And so we often begin workshops with an activity to open our senses. Then, with our senses fully open, we move very, very slowly through the space. In this slow pace, we find a spot where we feel called to spend some time, and we just sit, still and quiet. From there, we move through the forest (or wasteland or meadow or park) with a buddy and, based on what we notice, ask questions that challenge us to notice more, and answer questions with questions to push our awareness even further.

These four tools are the backbone of our practice of listening to the land. We delve into them in more detail in the Learning from the Land guide, so here we will focus more on the consequences of incorporating this kind of listening into our daily lives.

Spending time with the land, staying in our senses, and asking questions might sound like simple things, but in mainstream society we're conditioned to deaden

our senses, and often the environments we live in often don't exactly inspire us to pay close attention. When we do begin listening to the land, we're likely to notice some really painful realities.

We know that, in many ways, we are past the point of no return. We know this because we hear about how many ecological tipping points have become unavoidable, we hear that half the world is deforested and that the oceans are dying. And we know this too because this loss is before our eyes on a daily basis. It's there in small ways, like when a rewilding field is bulldozed and paved over. We also experience it in larger ways, like when noticing the amazing fragment of old growth forest in the middle of the suburbs makes obvious just how much has been lost to make these modern lives possible.

Often, perhaps because opening our senses can come with hurt, we notice that participants in our workshops want to rush to a kind of spiritual knowledge, talking about the "energy" of the land or paying attention to how a tree might be feeling rather than observing its traits. We encourage settlers especially to hold back on this kind of thing, and to focus on observing the physical world and understanding its rhythms. As Starhawk writes in The Earth Path:

> "Unless our spiritual practice is grounded in a real connection to the natural world, we run the risk of simply manipulating our own internal imagery and missing the real communication taking place all around us."

In some tellings, the central difference between colonizer and Indigenous worldviews is that an Indigenous worldview sees everything as animated with spirit. We aren't advocating for a reductive materialism, but we also see that earth-based spiritual practices in Indigenous communites are rooted in many generations of careful observation of the land and are dedicated to living more harmoniously with the rhythms of nature. We can't just show up as settlers and claim to access spiritual knowledge without putting in the work to understand the plants, animals, winds, waters, and soils of our landbases. It can be scary to begin this, because it brings us face to face with all that we've lost.

Everyone alive today is living in a time of crisis and we all feel it deeply. We need to be generous with each other as we are all people who have experienced trauma, often in multi-layered, compounded ways. When our collective first started doing this work, we hadn't thought much about this yet. We didn't expect that our work would come to centre health and healing as much as it has.

We were surprised by some of the big sadness and pain that opening to our senses brought up in workshops. There is the pain of disconnection, that feeling that everything we see is a mocking reminder of how little we know, and our senses close up to avoid the reality of our own blindness. There is the way that connecting with the land can call back the loss and trauma of having had places that we loved

and connected with in the past destroyed. As settlers, the pain of recalling that the meadow we played in as a child is now under a big box store is just a small taste of the huge and multi-generational wounds left in many Indigenous communities by the destruction of their traditional territories.

We can face the crisis knowing that we do not have the skills and experience needed to deal with it. But we need to make space to grieve this lack and to let go of harmful illusions, such as the hope that someone else might be better equipped to deal with it. This is one of the ways that the ecology we seek is anarchistic – it takes a great deal of courage to trust our own observations and experience and to embrace our own agency. We can open our eyes and see things how they really are: deeply in crisis, yet streaked with amazing hope and beauty.

As we learn to listen to the land and to read its stories, it becomes clear that even in the most polluted industrial wasteland or in the centre of the largest cities, the wild is already rising to these challenges in thousands of small ways. Look for it in the spring, before the lawn mowers get to work – do you see the tree seedlings popping up in the grass, always ready? Look for the signs of coyotes living invisibly among us by the hundreds, or for the medicinal plants that insist on growing exactly where they are needed most.

Practicing deep listening as a part of building a relationship with the land means we will shift our focus to the natural world that's all around us all the time and everywhere. And that will be the focus of the next piece in this series, Urban Ecology.

Urban Ecology

We practice deep listening as part of building a relationship with the land, then we will begin to shift our focus to the natural world in our daily lives. It involves a shift away from paying attention to things like advertising, media, and each others' clothing. It is also a shift out of our own heads to fully inhabit the world around us – there are trees to get to know on every street! Do you remember the many ways the sky changes throughout the day? Where does the wind come from? What creatures come out with the moon?

We live in a city, as most people do. But the urban space is not one that's typically thought of in terms of ecology. Too often, connecting with the land is seen as requiring an escape from the city to somewhere that's supposedly more free, mirroring the colonial myths that drove many settlers to the wilds of the "new world" to begin with. Urban spaces are important sites of resistance to the oppressive and destructive power structures that are based in cities. If people who care about the health of the wild focus their energy only on defending spaces that are considered pristine, or if they simply flee, then the movements to protect land are much weaker for it.

Developing an understanding ofurban ecology means we need to learn to see the city as habitat, as a part of watersheds, and appreciate the ways that the healths of human and wild communities are joined.

In a watershed, every piece of land is deeply connected to every other. The streets we walk each day are vitally important to the un-named watershed in the buried streams and sewer system, which is vitally important to the Great Lakes, which are hugely important to the whole earth! This was the big lesson from our Seeds of Resistance workshop series: no matter where you are, the land under your feet is worth getting to know and fighting for.

If we can shift our understanding of cities to see them as ecosystems, then we can see ourselves and our communities as part of those ecosystems. And if we are part of those ecosystems, then it's obvious that the health of human communities in cities is linked to the health of the land there. The other side of that coin is an important part of understanding colonization: genocide and ecocide are inseparable, that the killing of land and the killing of cultures is the same process. This is a big reason why Indigenous struggles for sovereignty are so often centered on land and development.

One of the most consistent responses we hear at our workshops is how liberating it is to be given permission to love the scrubby meadow beside the parking lot, or to get excited about the weeds coming up in your back yard. Remember when we discussed the process of succession? Even in the middle of downtown, the land is pushing towards greater health and biodiversity.

Where are the remaining sources of spring water? What directions are the toxic plumes moving through the ground water? Where are the large populations of deer bottle-necked? Where are the creeks that the fish still run? Who profits off those smokestacks and who gets cancer? Whose local forests are cleared to make way for a highway? Whose neighbourhoods see their green spaces expand, valued and protected?

We suggest that many social struggles, such as anti-poverty or anti-gentrification, could be similarly rooted in the land. In Hamilton, the poorest neighbourhoods, with the highest rates of respiratory disease are also the ones with the least trees. The wealthier parts of town enjoy better access to large conservation areas, while the few forests in downtown and the east end are growing in abandoned spaces and are not protected or valued in the same way. The toxic legacy of Hamilton's waning industry also disproportionately affects broke communities, and the movement of that industry from the city leaves people with precarious income, which often means moving is not an option.

We tried to dig into these issues of poverty and gentrification with last spring's workshop series, North-End Raccoon Walks. The North-End is a formerly industrial area of Hamilton – it's where we live, and we wanted to celebrate the ecological health of its rewilding industrial spaces. This celebration helped us develop our

understanding of succession, bioremediation, and habitat expansion, which is about embracing the *opposite* of tidy parks and pricey condos.

One aspect of gentrification in Hamilton has been mowing down the meadows of Goldenrod, Wild Carrot, and scrubby Cherry trees and replacing them with yet another field of neatly mowed grass. It involves cutting back the overgrown alleyways to make way for sparse planters that offer no food or habitat to birds animal and insects. It often looks like replacing big, mature, 'unruly' trees with sickly nursery seedlings, whose short life spans mean that the neighbourhood will never have a mature tree canopy. The workshops ended with a vision of taking and holding space in the neighbourhood with habitat-based bioremediation projects as a way of resisting development and the 'cleansing' that gentrification demands.

Our collective is pretty new to acting on ways to encourage this health. But we highly recommend starting guerrilla forest gardens and tree nurseries while dreaming big about what is possible. We get a lot of our knowledge and inspiration for how to do this from the books of a local botanist and medical biochemist, Diana Beresford-Kroeger. Her books discuss the habitat and health benefits of various tree species in a great vision of rewilding city spaces.

She refers to this vision as the bioplan. In Arboretum America, Diana describes the bioplan as a way of thinking that makes space for "the domatal hairs on the underside of deciduous trees harbouring the parasites for aphids. It is the ultraviolet traffic light signaling system in flowers for the insect world. It is the terpene aerosol S.O.S produced by plants in response to invasive damage. It is the toxic trick offered by plants for the protection of butterflies. It is a divine contract, to all who share this planet."

Urban space contains more possibility than we are often allowed to imagine. Looking at cities in terms of ecology opens up new strategic and tactical opportunities for our struggles against the systems of domination, but it also just makes our lives better. We'd rather live in a world that celebrates the vibrant energy of tiny alleyway seedlings, coywolves, raccoons, insect pollinators, and the signs of rain on the horizon than in the stifling, materialistic, head-phone culture the managers of the city space seek to impose.

Re-enchanting

We are all connected to the land and, deep inside of us, that knowledge persists. It rises up in us when we're out in the scrubby wild meadows that are always pushing back at the city's edges, or it presses its way into our consciousness, interrupting our routines and reminding us what matters.

And yet, there exists a pervasive riptide that can drag us away from that connection. Society promotes and enforces a way of living that's quite opposite of being

enchanted by the land. This goes a long way towards explaining where we've been for the six months since our last post…

We all get swept away sometimes for lots of different reasons. What's important is to make sure to escape our daily lives, even if just for a half-running giddy trip to the pier on your night-shift lunch-break, to scream and laugh into the coming-winter winds. Most likely you will find wonderful surprises, like that wild strawberry and mugwort grow from the asphalt there. Or maybe just find time to stand outside the door, face warmed by the sun, observing a cheeky Bluejay. Such surprises open our hearts, eloquently reminding us of the amazing beauty and resiliency of the wild. Even when we return to work, the feeling lingers that we are always connected to that great web of life, that we are held by it and cared for.

Re-enchantment is the word our collective thinks best describes this sort of feeling and action. It's about curiosity, enthusiasm, play, and a desire to share it all with others. We strive to have our thoughts and actions grow from this re-enchantment, and we think it's contagious. Because it wants to spread and be shared, re-enchantment is not a retreat. There is not enough wild space left for retreat to be an option, and attempts at personally escaping risk leave the needs of the land and of those most hurt by colonial society for last. We feel an urgency to fight back, to hold the hard truths in our hearts even as we pursue beauty and richness.

Re-enchantment is a sometimes difficult and always ongoing process. We need to take time to heal and nourish the connection to the land that we are all born with. We include the prefix "*re-*" before "enchantment" to celebrate and emphasize this. Self-repression and alienation from the earth are actively beaten into us through forces like industrial education, mass media, and institutionalization. But we can break the spell by constantly fighting to remember, and to spread our enchantment like wildfire.

For some folks, the weight of daily traumas and repression don't leave room for much enchantment. Those hurt most by this culture of death are those who perpetrate destruction least and often have the least access to healing creeks and wise old trees. We've often come to places where the forest suddenly ends to make way for a giant mansion – it's a visceral reminder that easy access to healthy wild spaces is directly related to class and social position.

When access to wild space is reserved for the most privileged, what is good for the health of those spaces comes to be defined by the powerful. And when the powerful define what's good for the land, then it becomes difficult to build a movement for the health of the land that also challenges power systems. Most modern conservation and environmental groups are tragically good examples of this: they embrace the logic of private property, policing, social control, and restricted access to protect pockets of wilderness in ways that are valued by elites. This leads to forests being seen as just another site of recreation and creates social and psycho-

logical barriers in addition to the material ones – "hiking" isn't one of my hobbies, so why should I go to the forest?

If we want to participate in resistance movements that are connected to the land on which they struggle, then unequal access to wildspaces can be a worthwhile challenge to take on. A few years ago, we went on a series of hikes with youth from a local neighbourhood who, when we first met them, thought that the only place to hangout was the mall. We offered to take them all to the movies if they went for a walk with us to a nearby waterfall. Running through the forest to the sound of rushing water, leaping between rocks, laughing as it began to snow – these experiences spoke for themselves. After that first walk, we didn't need any more movie bribes. Through re-enchantment, some of the barriers to accessing wild space, not knowing about it or being afraid of it, melted away.

Two examples of groups who support youth in re-enchanting in ways that inspire us are the Purple Thistle Youth Urban Agriculture Division in Vancouver, and Rooted in Rivers in Kitchener-Waterloo. These projects were initiated by politically engaged people who believe that deepening our connection to the land within our own lives or small social scenes is not enough. They seek to connect with those most impacted by environmental injustice. And these groups understand that relationships built from loving the land increases our capacity and desire to defend the health of the wild and of our communities – they see re-enchantment as part of broader social struggles.

Waziyatawin offers a definition of cultural appropriation in Unsettling Ourselves that we take as a guiding principle for our work. We paraphrase it as: if someone is profiting from traditional Indigenous knowledge on traditional lands, while many of the Indigneous people whose knowledge and lands they are do not have access to them, and this person is not working to destroy those obstacles and contribute to decolonization, then that person is appropriating. They are a colonizing force.

Unfortunately, mainstream conservation and naturalist groups, as well as many groups inspired by the Wilderness Awareness School, fall into this definition of appropriation. These groups, rather than building links in communities impacted by environmental injustice, focus their efforts on cultivating so-called "environmental leadership" among communities who already enjoy privileged access to wild spaces. And they also do work that disconnects our relationship to the land from an analysis of power or oppression. This is knowing the land without resistance, nature connection without decolonization, without struggle or solidarity.

The strength of our relationships, both to each other and to the land, is our capacity for creation. We want to build relationships that are based on collectively breaking from the haze of city lights for a deep forest walk at night, remembering the ways that we can and will adjust, putting aside constricting safety concerns of city life, and embracing chaos and risk! We want to find that spirit of enchantment,

share it with others, and work to let that spirit fill our lives and communities.

Unexpertedness

In this last article of our series Towards an Anarchist Ecology, after maybe sounding like we know a thing or two, we'd like to end with the idea of Unexpertness. The idea of expertise is a big barrier connecting with the land, alienated from our own experience. As if people with advanced degrees are more qualified than the rest of us to notice what is around them!

The opposite of expertise is not ignorance, it is humility and sharing. We don't want to cultivate our own expertise, we want to generalize the practice of enthusiastically connecting with the land. We want to work hard and learn lots, but we don't want to take on the baggage of "expert". Anyone can get to know the land where they live, and the pressure of being an expert actually makes it harder to keep a playful and humble attitude.

In the early days of KLR's existence, we attended a guided tree walk through the Strathcona neighbourhood of Hamilton. We were excited at the prospect of a community event dedicated to appreciating the local trees that do so much to make our neighbourhoods livable. But we were disappointed to find ourselves part of a disempowered mass of people passively trailing behind a white guy who did all the talking. Even when asked about something he didn't know ("Does your definition of what counts as 'native' take into account the northward migration of Appalachian tree species that has been ongoing since the last glaciation and has continued since colonization?") he still had to act like he knew. This pretty much guaranteed that he would be the only one at the event who didn't learn anything, and why would anyone want that?

We've dedicated a lot of our work to not being that guy. As is laid out in more detail in the Learning from the Land Guide, we try to lead from behind. We want to trust each others' knowledge and wisdom. In our workshops, almost all of the points we would want end up being articulated by our participants, if we can help create the situations for them to experience it. One example is a workshop held in a narrow forest remnant that experienced a lot of wind damage. We were of course very excited about the fallen trees and were full of facts about all the ways they create habitat. But before we could lecture about the percentage by weight of living matter in a dead tree vs a living one, folks came back from a sit-spot full of excitement about the universes of spiders, insects, and fungus they had been sitting on.

It can seem overwhelming to face our own alienation from the land, but we celebrate these beginnings as ways to start filling the gaping void of this society with meaningful connections and direct experience. These kinds of breaks with

authority are a big part of what anarchy is about. When we realize *for ourselves* the ways that healthy plant communities prevent erosion, or how some flycatchers and other small birds can only breed in deep forest, or how the presence of invasive junk trees can actually make wastelands richer, these truths are filled with a passionate and irresistible urgency. They are not just abstracted facts to be either memorized or forgotten – they become a part of who we are as living creatures in the world. From these places, we are guided to act in a way that is rooted in anarchist ideas.

Unexpertness involves setting aside both our own pressures to be an expert and also the reverence we hold for those who claim that title. This has lead to challenging some less visible form of authority in nature loving spaces too…

As we've said a few times in this series, that it's important to resist jumping straight to big spiritual conclusions when you set out to build a relationship with the land. We want to observe and be critical, and we also want to speculate and imagine – but we especially want to be clear on which is which, and not treat our speculations as observations!

To claim unaccountable spiritual knowledge of what a plant or the land is saying to you without having a deep relationship with that land is expertly behaviour (not to mention colonial, as we discussed in Deep Listening). It is asking others to accept one's perspective as true not based on its resonance with their own experiences, but simply on the authority of that person's claimed special senses.

Because it requires a deep, longterm relationship, land-based spiritual knowledge resides with elders in many traditions. Elders are valued not just for the knowledge they hold, but for their experience of gaining that knowledge and for their ability to show how people can find it for themselves. However most of us, and especially settlers, do not have access to a wise older generation to learn from. We can definitely seek out people who've been tackling these issues for longer than we have, but with nearly all land-based cultures either destroyed or marginalized, often the best we can do is to mourn this lack and to embrace the process of exploring without a guide.

The Wilderness Awareness School presents field guides as a way to fill the role of elders but, this is quite a problematic idea. Nearly all field guides and naturalist references are written by white, conservation-minded, settler men. We do use field guides and value them greatly, but it's important to distinguish here between useful information and genuine wisdom. We can draw information from field guides and similar books without accepting the methods and conclusions of their authors as being particularly wise.

Anarchist Ecology is based on relationships, so it makes no sense at all to compete, to hold back what we have, or to transform our passion for the wild into a commodity on the market. We love to create resources that others can freely use, to share facilitation skills and support others in doing similar work, and we want to give it all away for free, as part of ongoing struggles against capitalism and colo-

nialism.

Like so much of what we've had to say in this series, Unexpertness is about keeping the land in the centre of your practice. The desire to be an expert is egocentric, it brings the emphasis back on to ourselves. But it's not about us knowing things, it's about how it's all already written on the land and we're just learning to see it.

And so concludes our series, Towards an Anarchist Ecology. Rooted in relationships, cultivating deep listening, urban ecology, re-enchanting, and unexpertness, along with a fierce rejection of dominator ecology – thank you for coming with us as we tried to give some flesh to these starting points for an anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial knowledge of the land. To close of this series, we'd like to share another quote from Mel Bazil's talk at the Victoria Anarchist Bookfair. Here, he's commenting on the Unist'ot'en action camp's requirement that guests to the territory ask permission before entering:

> "But you're not just asking permission, like rights. But how can we share in the responsibilities to be on the land. Sharing responsibilities, sharing the law. Self-regulation. To me, that totally relates to anarchy. So when we're conducting this protocol, we called in the Free Prior and Informed Consent protocol. But we weren't mirroring something from the United Nations, we weren't mirroring something from a hierarchical system. [...] We weren't mirroring the racist papal bulls. It was the papal bulls that said we can have rights. But Indigenous rights, that doesn't exist. Indigenous responsibilities exist. Anarchist's responsibilities exist. How do we communicate those?
>
> "It might feel out of place for you to ask permission to exist somewhere, but what you're saying is, can I bring my knowledge, with yours, together, to share in the responsibilities in your lands? Because the people here have thousands and thousands of years of observation of how to exist with the land and with the biodiversity, and how to have a relationship with the water. We don't own the water, we can't put our name on it. [...] We don't own the land. We own our responsibilities to the land and to the water. That's how I relate anarchy and Indigenous societies. We transcend rights, each of us."

For your reference...

- Gerry Waldron's Trees of the Carolinian Forest for Oak Savannah and Oak-hickory ecosystem facts
- Mel Bazil talk: http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/62845

- The Living Great Lakes, by Jerry Dennis
- Silent Spring, by Rachel Carson
- Breaking Concrete: Selected Texts Translated from Lèse-Béton — find on zinelibrary.info
- Zone a defender: http://zad.nadir.org/
- Fish die-off in the Red Hill Creek: http://www.thespec.com/news-story/2253733-few-answers-in-red-hill-creek-fish-kill/
- Ontario's Old Growth Forests, by Michael Henry adn Peter Quinby
- The Earth Path, by Starhawk
- Diana Beresford-Kroeger wrot Arboretum America, Arboretum Borealis, and the Global Forest, among other amazing books.
- Purple Thistle Youth Urban Agriculture Division: https://radiclebeets.wordpress.com/
- Unsettling Ourselves: available at http://unsettingamerica.wordpress.com/
- Waziyatawin's website: http://waziyatawin.net/
- Insurrectionary Ecology: http://zinelibrary.info/insurrectionary-ecology-0