

Reading Group

Re-earthing: Making Courageous Cultivars

part of “Openings and Earthings” - a project to breach spacetimes
with TANAH and Bras Basah Open: School of Philosophy and Theory

April - September+ 2019

Caring is not abstract. The circle of ecological compassion we feel is enlarged by direct experience of the living world, and shrunk by its lack.

-- Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

As Timothy Morton points out, a preponderance of ecocritical writing is conducted in the shade of “bright green,” a hue that tends to be “affirmative, extraverted and masculine” as well as “sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty, and ‘healthy.’” Bright green is also too solitary, a romantic color through which individuals commune with nature and arrive at personal revelations and solipsistic calm—as if nature were an angel or messenger.

-- Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Prismatic Ecologies*, xxi

Verdant, parklike, and unpopulated, Spaceship Earth (that green, blue, and white marble suspended in a cosmic sea of black) offers too bounded, too totalized, and too self-contained a vision. To compose (write, paint, envision, act) ecologically is to build--in openness, and therefore vulnerability.”

-- Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Prismatic Ecologies*, xxii

You are walking out of the supermarket. As you approach your car, a stranger calls out, “Hey! Funny weather today!” With a due sense of caution—is she a global warming denier or not?—you reply yes. There is a slight hesitation. Is it because she is thinking of saying something about global warming? In any case, the hesitation induced you to think of it. Congratulations: you are living proof that you have entered the time of hyperobjects. Why? You can no longer have a routine conversation about the weather with a stranger. The presence of global warming looms into the conversation like a shadow, introducing strange gaps. Or global warming is spoken or—either way the reality is strange.

A hyperobject has ruined the weather conversation,...

-- Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 99

As we feel the impact of our earth's ecological changes directly in our lives, we recognise the the implications of this change with sudden, unwelcome urgency. The environment is no longer merely a side hobby we can check in on. The environment's protrusion into our daily life, and extrusion beyond the corporeal body it was meant to hold--expanding into something gargantuan, planetary-scale, a "hyperobject" of monsters and assemblages--is destabilising, disorienting, disquieting. "It" morphs from environment into "earth", into "world", into "planet", and "we" morph as shadows blending into the narrative reference that each new "environment"--work, social, family, friends--finds us in. But if the world *is* materially changing, how can the words we use in our stories, narratives and communications with one another reflect the interconnectedness of how everything is changing--and how to orient ourselves sufficiently within the disorientation of old categories falling apart, to seize the opening to make a world less insularly local, more diverse and multiple?

Our sessions are guided by the following questions, but are not limited to these:

- How do we identify food and agricultural practices that injure ecologies and societies near and far from us? How do we identify processes of scarring and healing?
- How can we open our senses to that which is unfamiliar, and earth ourselves in land that has become unfamiliar, in the companionship of others?
- How do rural and urban worlds come together in our imaginaries and experiences, through our senses, love and labour?
- How do we transmit practices of ecological care and attention, communicative modes that dissolve the distinction between inside/outside, internal/external, human/non-human, city/nature?
- How do we grow communicative radicle structures that are multiply open and learning, while forming hybrid community with other ecological beings?

The sessions orient towards new frames of reference for our (potential) continued work together, that we will address over the final two sessions:

- What other words / phrases can we modify in our communications with others, about nature, the environment, in Singapore, in Southeast Asia, as a part of the planet?
- How do we visualise connections between very small, hyperlocal scales?
- How do we amplify the effects that small-scale agroecological initiatives we know about can make, on other people and the world?
- How do we create vectors that transmit materials, knowledges and experiences between places and nodes in an assemblage?

Each topic/session of this reading group proposes a thesis, a set of readings and discussion around the main thesis. People are invited to read, understand, and talk together. From these reading groups we aim to evolve a foundation for how a city-wide soil regeneration

project may present an opportunity to learn, across ecological strata and national, ethnic, citizenship borders.

tanah (Soil/ Earth in Malay) is a duo consisting of Michelle Lai and Huiying Ng that explores symbiotic relationships and forms of everyday participation through nature and food-themed interventions, research and dialogue.

The **Bras Basah School of Theory and Philosophy** is a collective aiming to discuss, converse and share in an atmosphere of peer-learning. Attuned to recent trends in critical theory and continental philosophy, and engaged in fields beyond, it experiments with modes of humanistic inquiry, discussion and critique. Some of the current initiatives include small reading groups, and intimate sessions involving theory and philosophy and a particular cultural medium, eg. films, photography and sound.

Topics/sessions

Session 1. Agricultural scars and agroecological healing

Session 2. Ecological grief

Session 3. Ecocriticism; Dirt, Earth and Soil

Session 4. Learning to see: rhizomes, assemblages and generative routes

The bookshelf

Session 4

Learning to see: rhizomes, assemblages and generative routes

Moving on from the work of undoing language and terminology, we take select words, sayings and phrases and consider the imagery they conjure of the environment and our(/my, your) role in it, across different (culture, city/outskirts, North/South) contexts. How does ecological change and transition connect with social change and transition? What is the role of an activ(ist) agent in this process--one that may be human or non-human? How do intersecting agentic capacities meet, fuse, conflict, and deconflict to produce hybrid assemblages? How do the grounding environments that these agents are in--work/social environments, soil media environments--affect these exchanges and interactions?

[Main Read]

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2003. "Learning to See." In *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press. [[PDF scan](#)]

[Just-for-interest read - some concepts will be touched upon in session]

McFarlane, Colin. Learning the city: knowledge and translocal assemblage. Vol. 101. John Wiley & Sons, 2011. [PDF, [Chapter 1](#), [Chapter 3](#) - concept & case study respectively]

McFarlane's work on urban learning assemblages draws from a field of study devoted to policy mobilities, which he outfits with a conceptual and epistemological framing derived from Deleuzian thinking. His use of "assemblages" draws on Foucauldian notions of power and governmentality, but focuses on generative, emergent forms, rather than resultant formations.

Chapter 1: Learning Assemblages

Chapter 3: Learning Social Movements: Tactics, Urbanism and Politics

[Post-session read for interest]

Bunnell, Tim, and Peter Marolt. 2014. "Cities and Their Grassroutes." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (3): 381–85. doi:10.1068/d14043cm. [[PDF](#)]

Reading Notes

With this one simple read this week, we encourage you to savour the words and let them draw you out--away from words, into the world.

Session Format

Meet us at 7pm on 19/9, just outside The Substation, where the "First Botanic Garden" is.

Learning to See: Weed - Spotting

Weeds are commonly neglected in our urban and natural landscape. Look out for some of these interesting weed - plants found just outside the Substation, up till a block away - and any other plants or phenomena that catches your eye, note down it's behaviors, characteristics, distinctive features. We'll be discussing some of these observations during the reading group. All of the suggested weeds and herbs are edible, but caution is always advised!

Suggested time: 30 mins

Some tips on seeing weeds:

- Observe - touch and smell, take note of any responses from the plants
- Sketching as a means of studying the plant: bring a notebook!

Lavender Sorrel



Purslane



Laksa



Sweet Potato Leaves



Fame Flower



Blue Butterfly Pea and/or hybrids



Photo credits: Nature Love You

Moving beyond the near-to-hand and pastoral (i.e., bright green) locales that are the focus of much environmental criticism requires emphasizing the cosmos in ecocosmopolitanism—

The good part, the glorious part, they all agreed, was the look of the land under the double light of Tau Ceti and E, especially early in the long mornings, and now, they were finding again, in the slanting light of the long afternoons. Possibly the experience of the eclipse had sprung something in their ability to see. In the ship they saw only the near and the far; this middle distance on Aurora, what some called planetary distance, others simply the landscape, at first had been hard for them to focus on, or even to look for, or to comprehend when they did see it. Now that they were properly ranging it, and grasping the spaciousness of it, it was intoxicating. It was enough to make them happy just to go outside and walk around, and look at the land. The wind was nothing compared to that.

yet not in the classic sense of a tidy and beautiful whole (Greek kosmos means “order, ornament”). Latour coined the “dirty” term kakosmos to describe the tangled, fecund, and irregular pluriverse humans inhabit along with lively and agency-filled objects, materials, and forces. A middle space, un-bounded, perturbed, contingent. “Contingency,” observes Michel Serres, “means common tangency,” haptic entanglement of body and world, knotted and multidimensional admixture, so that “knowing things requires one first of all to place oneself between them.”

We end by beginning.

Blue: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Prismatic Ecology*, xxiii, 2013
In-between: Extract from Kim Stanley Robinson, *Aurora*, 2015
Red: *Us, Hope*, 2019