



feral feminisms

**Hacking the Anthropocene:
Do-It-Together (DIT)**

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“Snail-oyster”: Theories, Metaphors, and Praxes for De-Anthropocentric Movement toward Degrowth

Jane Affleck

The context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic highlights Western/ industrialized/settler-colonial societies' need to address systemic injustices in marginalized human and more-than-human communities, within the larger context of the climate crisis. Offering “Snail-oyster” as a metaphor, this paper considers practices that move toward de-anthropocentrism and degrowth as vital steps toward addressing the climate crisis; the paper also links certain Indigenous theories and praxes to recent settler shifts in thinking and action, such as attention to place or “bioregion” and reciprocity with non-human species. The author’s drawing practice is also discussed, as one means of engaging with other bioregional lifeworlds towards decentering the human and working toward equitable, balanced lifeways.

Introduction

In early 2020, as nations around the planet began to see an increase in cases of the Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19), many imposed a “lockdown,” with citizens mandated to “shelter in place” and maintain physical distance when in public spaces (Alwan et al. 2020, e71). Many closed their borders to international non-essential travellers (Government of Canada “Travel Restrictions” 2020, n.p.), and some nations changed rules regarding passage through internal borders. In what is now known as Canada, several provinces and territories imposed strict rules regarding entry (Government of Prince Edward Island 2020, n.p.). While these limitations have caused much disruption, some researchers have found a small measure of hope in the fact that the lockdown has resulted in reduced carbon emissions. One source estimated that global emissions could fall by five percent during 2020, the largest decline since the end of World War II (Nasralla, Volcovici, and Green 2020, n.p.). Le Quéré et al. found that “daily global CO₂ emissions decreased by ~17% [...] by early April 2020 compared with the mean 2019 levels, just under half from changes in surface transport. At their peak, emissions in individual countries decreased by ~26% on average” (2020, n.p.). More recent data have indicated that global anthropogenic carbon emissions dropped by between 6.4% and 7% during 2020, compared with 2019 (Canadell et al. 2020; Friedlingstein et al. 2020; Stanford University 2020; Tollefson 2021). To celebrate this small reduction in emissions without acknowledging the continually rising global death toll due to COVID-19, and the impacts of those losses, is a gross oversight; however, both the pandemic and the climate crisis underscore the fact that humans are interdependent on other lifeforms and life-sustaining systems. Furthermore, addressing these global emergencies requires complex global efforts, even as not all human populations or regions bear the brunt of their impacts. Both crises also raise questions regarding which lives, whether human or more-than-human, are grievable when lost (Butler 2020, The Culture of Grief research centre 2020). As well, as climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe states, “Anything



that causes human suffering is a tragedy, but [the pandemic] highlights the fact that often we have become accustomed to—and blasé to—issues like air pollution that are responsible for millions of deaths every year" (CBC Radio 2020, n.p.).

Well before the pandemic was declared, some groups and individuals already recognized the wisdom of remaining in place, and in so doing, the benefits of fostering deeply engaged relationships with that place and its more-than-human beings. For millennia, Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island (North America) have been maintaining relationships founded on reciprocity with the more-than-human world through land-based teachings and practices (Kimmerer 2013; Simpson 2011, 2017; Kaagegaabaw 2020). More recently, non-Indigenous authors and artists have also begun advocating for a "bioregional" approach to thinking, living, writing, and art-making. In *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, for example, author and artist Jenny Odell challenges notions of neoliberal/late-capitalist "productivity" and calls for resistance to using "technologies that encourage a capitalist perception of time, place, self, and community" (2019, xi). She explains that "resistance-in-place"

means embracing and trying to inhabit [...] ideas [...] of maintenance as productivity, of the importance of nonverbal communication, and of the mere experience of life as the highest goal. It means recognizing and celebrating a form of the self that changes over time, exceeds algorithmic description, and whose identity doesn't always stop at the boundary of the individual. (xvi)

For Odell, "resistance-in-place" happens in one's "bioregion" (xvi) and involves doing "nothing," which in fact comprises "a series of movements: 1) a dropping out, not dissimilar from the 'dropping out' of the 1960s; 2) a lateral movement outward to things and people that are around us; and 3) a movement downward into place" (xi). These movements, she says, which involve "rerouting and deepening [...] attention to place[,] will likely lead to awareness of one's participation in history and in a more-than-human community" (xii). For Odell, this has involved nurturing a passion for birds, as well as learning the history of colonialism in the Americas—particularly in what is now the United States—and the harms colonialism has inflicted on Indigenous peoples and their lifeways.

The "hack" thus proposed here is a kind of "doing nothing together" in the Anthropocene: a non-productive action that comprises attention to or "meditative awareness" (Morton 2017, 188) of one's surroundings or bioregion and of the more-than-human beings who co-inhabit it. For my part, doing nothing through "resistance-in-place" has involved walking in my bioregion and drawing, as will be described here; the "together" aspect involves observing and interacting with molluscs (and their empty shells). Arguably, a practice of "doing nothing together" through "resistance-in-place" may help shift Western/White-settler humans' anthropocentric perspectives toward understandings and practices of mutualism and reciprocity that may in turn help to address some of the harms of the Anthropocene, such as climate change. To this end, I also offer "Snail-oyster," who may be considered a kind of metaphorical mascot for this hack—an inspiration to refocus attention on the small and the local, and on theories and practices of "maintenance," as per Odell, rather than boundless and harmful capitalist growth. With "Snail-oyster" as one guiding metaphor, the pandemic's first (and subsequent) mandates to "shelter in place" might be transformed into a version of Odell's "resistance-in-place," as we "drop out" and engage more deeply in our particular bioregions. In so doing, we might move beyond the pandemic to address the larger prevailing context of the climate crisis. The practice of maintenance might also incorporate theories and praxes of



“degrowth” as a means of resisting late-capitalist and colonial models of growth that erroneously assume infinite resources on a finite planet, as well as the superiority or “exceptionalism” of *Homo sapiens* (Weintrobe 2020, n.p.). Indeed, “Snail-oyster” might represent a metaphoric *modus operandi* for different ways of being, involving not only a reduction in global travel but also equity in community, expanded to include presently marginalized and at-risk human populations and more-than-human beings, whose lives are marginalized and at-risk due to anthropogenic climate change and loss of habitat.

Positioning Statement

In keeping with the themes discussed above, my self-reflection statement accounts for facets of my intersectional identity that may bear on the present work and, more literally, my physical position in time and space. In so doing, I aim to apply the advice of several writers, including Margaret Kovach (2009), Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), and Odell (2019), to consider self-in-relation to others (human and more-than-human) and self-in-relation to place.

I am White and of European descent, a ninth-generation settler-Canadian whose ancestors arrived in 1786 in what is now Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada, where I have been a resident again since June 2018. Those ancestors were United Empire Loyalists, settlers of British heritage living in New York State who were exiled after the American Revolution. They benefited from land-grant systems established by the British that were aimed at encouraging settlement on PEI in the decades following the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763). These land grants were to the detriment of the French Acadians, who had begun to settle the area in the early 1600s and who were themselves exiled during the Acadian Expulsion (beginning in 1755), and to the indigenous Mi’kmaq communities, who had been living on Epekwitk (the Mi’kmaq name for PEI) for millennia prior to European colonization and the concomitant policies of cultural genocide central to Canada’s founding as a nation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015).¹ I have experienced privileges that stem in part from my ancestors’ ability work (on) land they had been “given” by the government and understood as their property—land that had been politically usurped from the French and stolen from the Mi’kmaq. As well, as a White person with four post-secondary degrees, I have a level of education inaccessible to many.

Yet, these facts do not fully capture facets of my identity relating to how place contributes to my ongoing understanding and formation of self. Over the last six years or so, my notion of self-in-relation to place has been re-informed by, among other activities, reading the work of Indigenous writers who emphasize relationships to land and to other lifeforms. One example is Kimmerer, a botanist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013). In the chapter “Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide,” she considers nationhood through an ecological and bioregional frame: one’s “citizenship” is determined in relation to/with other beings in the immediate environment (167–174). Kimmerer declares herself to be a citizen of “Maple Nation” and recognizes that this incurs a stewardship role, and indeed that being a citizen of any nation should involve reciprocal responsibilities “and sharing the support of your community,” not merely a sense of entitlement to benefits, rights, and freedoms (168). Being a citizen means developing a relationship of reciprocity with all community members—whether human or more-than-human—taking care of others as they take care of you.

With Kimmerer’s logic in mind, I am a “citizen” of the intertidal zone of particular



stretches of Epekwitk’s/PEI’s coast. The intertidal, part of the larger littoral zone, includes the shoreline areas that are submerged at high tide and exposed at low, and may also include areas above the high-water mark. While writing this paper, I sat at a desk with a view of the beach where I encountered “Snail-oyster”—a beach where few sandy areas remain beyond the reach of high tides due to sea-level rise. This beach lies on the northeast-facing shore of a tidal estuary, in which oysters, periwinkles, and other molluscs abound. Since June 2018, time spent in the intertidal has been a panacea, helping to reduce stresses associated with finishing my PhD, working as a part-time sessional instructor and freelance writer, and recently, existing during a global pandemic. My experiences in the intertidal have prompted me to become less anthropocentric and perhaps even less domesticated—or less confined/defined by the boundaries that White, Western humans tend to create to distinguish between themselves and other self-willed beings, and between places designed to maximize our comfort (the “built environment”) and places deemed unfit or expendable (“waste land,” “resources,” etc.).

This notion of becoming undomesticated may suggest a move toward ferality; in some sense, this may be apt, but I acknowledge that the word feral is problematic. As Adrian Franklin notes in his discussion of cats in England and Australia, designating animals as feral means that they may “gain their potency as sources of danger because they threaten stable and proper categories of the social world. They give the appearance of a natural foundation, legitimacy, and solidity to what are always arbitrary and contestable social norms” (2014, 139). The word feral, then, may reinforce human assumptions about the “natural” primacy of Western/White-settler humans above other humans and lifeforms—particularly in countries with a history of colonization. As such, “feral” is anthropocentric and Eurocentric.

In their discussion of feral pigs, N. T. Rowan and Tracy L. Timmins make points similar to Franklin’s: they add that “[b]ecoming feral, or escaping domestication, can be interpreted as an act of agency. However, [...] while feral animals themselves may have agency, being named or treated as feral threatens this agency because it refers to the human authority to bring feral animals back under control” (2016, n.p.). I understand their point, particularly in considering just how limited a pig’s agency is when in the crosshairs of a hunter’s gun. That said, there may be another way to view human agency: if we understand ourselves as always-already beings-in-relation, we might also see that our agency is always-already limited. Consider Kimmerer’s notion of citizenship as one involving reciprocity with one’s bioregion: here, agency is augmented or constrained by how much we (choose to) care. Is choosing to do something that harms others (whether human or more-than-human) advisable if we in turn want to be cared for? By extension, in the context of the climate crisis, to always act on our own agentic desires in “Neoliberalism’s culture of uncare”—consuming single-use plastics, incessantly burning fossil fuels—ultimately is at our own expense, as our environment becomes ever more polluted and unliveable (Weintrobe 2020).² Finally, if we have a non-anthropocentric worldview, one that recognizes interdependence and reciprocity as fundamental ontological characteristics, then terms like “feral” may cease to be relevant, as the boundary between the categories “human” and “animal” will necessarily diminish.

Speaking of agency, I chose to return to this bioregion in part to reconnect and deepen my attention to it and its more-than-human inhabitants. One catalyst for doing so is in Indigenous knowledges, primarily Mi’kmaw and Anishinaabeg, about which I began learning shortly before starting my doctoral studies, and continued learning during and after. When I returned to Epekwitk, I had only vague inklings of how I might apply ontological and epistemological shifts to/in some kind of practice (such as writing or visual or other art-making). I began by taking daily walks on nearby beaches in the intertidal, where I sensorily



experienced, as I had as a child, this bioregion and its more-than-human inhabitants. I also began researching the history of European colonization and settlement in this region, including that of my ancestors. While walking can be considered a practice of attention and resistance-in-place in its own right, I have also created two series of ink-and-watercolour portraits of various mollusc species native to this bioregion. Drawing, too, is a form of attention or “meditative awareness” (Morton 2017, 188); it has amplified my feelings of connection to this place and its more-than-human inhabitants, as well as my understanding of their intrinsic worth outside of late-capitalist determinants of value based on economic productivity.

Encountering “Snail-Oyster”

In the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, when public-health officials across what is now known as Canada were mandating lockdown, I took longer walks than usual. During one such walk, I saw a conjoined set of tiny mollusc shells: an Atlantic oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*) bonded onto a periwinkle snail (*Littorina littorea*). I identified with this “Snail-oyster,” whose movements in the intertidal zone were limited; in lockdown, my own movements were markedly reduced as I completed teaching contracts from home and made only essential trips into public/urban spaces. Furthermore, I saw in this small co-being a metaphor with the potential to serve as a guide for Western/White-settler humans, as we consider life beyond the pandemic (as noted above).

Both animals are deceased and only the shells (or parts thereof) remain; both shells are 1.5 cm at their widest points. In larval form, the oyster swam freely in the tidal estuary until it “glued” to the anterior-dorsal surface of the periwinkle (NOAA 2020, n.p.). The edge of the oyster shell exceeds that of the snail by approximately 1.5 mm, such that when the living snail retreated inside the shell, the aperture edge and operculum (the corneous “trapdoor”) might not have lain completely flat on a surface. In motion, the snail would have led with the oyster, as though sporting a front bumper. To my human eyes, the oyster shell resembles a human ear protruding from the top front of the snail.

Periwinkles and oysters, and many other molluscs, live in Epekwitk’s intertidal zone. At low tide, periwinkles tend to cluster together in damp crevices of exposed sandstone bedrock, on and around other molluscs. At high tide, they perambulate, using their radulae (toothed tongues) to scrape the surfaces beneath them, ingesting phytoplankton (e.g., algae) and certain small animals (e.g., the larvae of barnacles, *Amphibalanus improvisus*). Their movements are random, though directional movements within the high- and middle-intertidal zones are understood to be influenced by light/dark and temperature (Little, Williams, and Trowbridge 2009).

Oysters have a small range of motion in their adult phase. As larvae, oysters freely swim, moving vertically within water currents and feeding on phytoplankton; after two weeks, they begin sinking to the bottom, seeking hard surfaces on which to bond (NOAA 2018, n.p.). Once bonded, oysters do not move, other than opening and closing their shells to feed, thereby filtering the water and providing numerous benefits to other species, including humans (University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science n.d., n.p.).

In terms of relative distance, the conjoined shells’ movement via my pocket from the intertidal to my house (approximately 1 km) is perhaps not dissimilar to my flying from Epekwitk to Toronto. To frame this somewhat differently, Snail-oyster (and each species individually) stay in their niche, engaging in their particular and limited kinds of “productivity”:



feeding, cleaning the water, and reproducing—lifecycle activities that arguably give as much as they take and contribute to a balanced ecosystem. Both snails and oysters consume excess algae that proliferate when nitrogen levels are high (often due to fertilizer run-off from nearby farms); as algae decompose, they deplete oxygen, creating conditions inhospitable to other marine species (Commission on Nitrates in Groundwater 2008). Oysters also absorb the nitrogen itself, helping prevent further algae blooms (Koenig 2018). The reciprocal relationship between oysters and their environment is highlighted in *The Oyster Garden: Kiju’ Tells Her Story*, a children’s book written in Mi’kmaq and English. The story’s narrator, Grandmother-oyster, states, “*Mn’tmu’k keknue’k telo’ti’tij sam’qwan-iktuk. Weli-anko’tmu’k sam’qwan aqq sam’qwan weli-ankweyuksi’k.* Oysters have a special relationship with water. We take care of the water and the water takes care of us” (Denny et al. 2016, 7). Mi’kmaq onto-epistemology, represented here by Grandmother-oyster, recognizes that relationships of reciprocity are essential to survival.

As a metaphor, Snail-oyster represent a kind of “resistance-in-place” in a bioregion; this hybrid creature maintained and sustained their own and others’ lives through small-scale, attentive actions in place, in a particular place. In her discussion of the importance of “maintenance” as an antidote to productivity in the context of boundless capitalist growth, Odell (2019) considers not only place but the “actual ground,” suggesting that contact with the earth itself is a reminder of our embodied connection to other lives in a particular place and time (21). She quotes David Abram:

“Direct sensuous reality,” writes Abram, “in all its more-than-human mystery, remains the sole solid touchstone for an experiential world now inundated with electronically generated vistas and engineered pleasures; only in regular contact with the tangible ground ... can we learn how to orient and navigate in the multiple dimensions that now claim us.” (21–22)

Snail-oyster—beings literally grounded via the periwinkle’s sprawling foot-body that is nearly always in contact with the intertidal—may remind humans that we too are physical, sensual, and always-already beings-in-relation with the more-than-human world, which encompasses “*what, when, and where we are*” (Odell 2019, 22). Furthermore, through their conjoint physicality, Snail-oyster may exemplify what Odell calls “sensitivity” to the environment and other beings, which “involves a difficult, awkward, ambiguous encounter” that may happen “between two differently shaped bodies that are themselves ambiguous” (24). Because of Snail-oyster’s minimal movement, physical connection to each other, and relationships of sensitivity and reciprocity within the intertidal, this hybrid co-being offers a potential model for a shift in Western/White-settler human lifeways, post-pandemic, as we move to address the anthropogenic climate crisis. Following Snail-oyster, we might a) reduce our scope of movement, b) consume more locally produced food, and c) become more appreciative of other beings by engaging more deeply in relationships of reciprocity or mutual aid. This shift in thought and practice has the potential to provide key benefits: reducing greenhouse gas emissions (such as carbon dioxide), which may reduce climate crisis-related loss/death, while shifting toward de-anthropocentric worldviews.

Recursive Practices of Attention (Repetition Is not Boring)

Between June 2018 and December 2020, I walked in the intertidal perhaps more than 450 times. The more often I am there, the more I see—and the more capable I am *of seeing* (and the



more I appreciate). This may be perplexing to anyone who presumes repetition is boring; however, with each walk as a step toward getting to know this bioregion, I have felt an enthusiasm not unlike that when strangers become friends—a mutual, reciprocal unfolding of selves over time, with a growing sense of appreciation, respect, and care. Like Odell, I have experienced a process of relationship building with the more-than-human world in a particular place over time, via a process of shifting or expanding attention. She describes her own process as a kind of re-mapping or “re-rendering” of her reality and herself in time and space:

As I disengaged the map of my attention from the destructive news cycle and rhetoric of productivity, I began to build another one based on that of the more-than-human community, simply through patterns of noticing. At first this meant choosing certain things to look at [...]. As a result, more and more actors appeared in my reality: after birds, there were trees, then different kinds of trees, then the bugs that lived in them. I began to notice [...] mountain ranges, fault lines, watersheds. [...] I was met with the uncanny knowledge that these had all been here before, yet they had been invisible to me in previous renderings of my reality. (Odell 2019, 122)

Through attention, shifting focus away from the self and to my surroundings, my understanding of place has become “bioregional,” which is, Odell says, “[s]imilar to many indigenous cultures’ relationships to land” (2019, 122). Bioregionalism is

based on observation and recognition of what grows where, as well as an appreciation for the complex web of relationships among those actors. More than observation, it also suggests a way of identifying with place, weaving oneself into a region through observation of and responsibility to the local ecosystem. (122)

Kimmerer (2013) indicates that having and maintaining a relationship to the more-than-human world is not exclusive to Indigenous people. Sharing the Potawatomi creation story about Skywoman, who fell to Earth and was immediately cared for by animals (geese, loons, otters, beavers, a turtle, etc.), Kimmerer explains that “[i]t was through [Skywoman’s] actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means [...] to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it” (9). Indeed, effects of the climate crisis, such as habitat loss for both human and more-than-human animals, further show the truth in Kimmerer’s words (Ahmed 2020; IUCN n.d.).

Over time and through attention, I have gained a deepening sense of responsibility to Epekwitk’s intertidal bioregion. In addition to feeling outrage—and ecological grief—when I see evidence that other humans disrespect this bioregion, I find some solace in offering small acts of kindness and care, not unlike those I might offer to friends. I gather myriad plastic trash, concerned with not only beautiful vistas but also the well-being of seabirds and fishes. When driftwood bonfires still smoulder near dry grasses bordering a small plot of woods, several hours after being abandoned, I smother the embers with sand. When I find deep herringbone tire tracks gouged into the clay substratum, indicating the theft of several hundred kilos of sand from the vulnerable shoreline, I contact the enforcement officer for the province’s Department of Environment, Water, and Climate Change. With these examples, I do not wish to “virtue signal” but rather to demonstrate my deep concern for this bioregion and the kind of simple actions that might comprise reciprocity.

The cavalier disregard demonstrated by other users of the intertidal is, as Kimmerer discusses, encouraged by the present economic model: “We’ve allowed the ‘market’ to define



what we value so that the redefined common good seems to depend on profligate lifestyles that [...] [impoverish] the soul and the earth” (2013, 307). As Kimmerer, Odell, and others advocate, the antidote is to immerse ourselves in our surroundings, broadening and deepening our connections to place and people, human and more-than-human. Becoming a citizen of a bioregion and treating the more-than-human world as friend or kin comprises a productivity that lies outside neoliberal capitalist frameworks. Actions of reciprocity are done for their own sake—and for the sake of relationship and sustaining lifeways—rather than for economic gain.

Drawing Attention: The Art of “Doing Nothing” and “Resisting-in-place”

From June to November 2018, as I began to rebuild relationship to my bioregion, I walked in the intertidal, observing, listening, smelling, touching, and gathering mollusc shells. I walked, as north winds began urging the last migratory birds to fly south, and as frost desiccated shoreline grasses, rendering them stiff, so they produced different sounds when chafing in those winds. I walked, swaddled in wool, till temperatures became so cold that ice in the estuary expanded and thickened, occluding the intertidal. Indoors, I observed the collected shells and began drawing them for the first time. In some ways, the practice of drawing replaced those shoreline walks: drawing, like walking, is recursive, a process involving observation, awareness/reception, sensation, and the building of relationships in space and time.

Drawing from life, whether the subjects are animate (or once animate) or not, is a form of meditation, a process of coming to awareness—in time (now) and place (here, with the subject of attention). Through the recursive activities of observing visual information about line, form, colour, and texture, I come to know the subjects of my drawings. Drawing from life, a subject close enough to see, touch, smell, or even taste, compels the observer to pay attention—not just to see but also to acknowledge the present moment and who/what is *present*. When drawing mollusc shells, I must also confront the fact that these shells, comprising layers of calcium carbonate, are remains of once-living beings. To draw portraits of mollusc shells is thus also to perform a kind of eulogy for the beings who once made and inhabited them. As such, the finished watercolour paintings are *memento mori*, contemporary *vanitas* that may remind the human maker and viewer alike to be humble—a subtle exercise in de-anthropocentrification.

Drawing is also another way of being a “citizen” of the intertidal, even when weather prohibits me from engaging directly with it. Drawing has been an impetus for deeper curiosity and empathy; I have researched molluscs, as well as the natural history of Epekwitk/PEI and the impacts of European settlement and farming. I began worrying, when storms churned up sediment in the estuary, for living molluscs’ well-being. I also became more attentive to the potential impact of my own actions, or absence thereof: if I bought a t-shirt made of synthetic fibres, then every time I washed it, particles would seep into the watershed and impact other lifeforms. If I didn’t pick up that coffee-cup lid, the tides would eventually reduce it to a powder of microplastic that molluscs and other animals might ingest (and, in turn, that might be ingested by humans consuming those animals).

The process of drawing is also not unlike the movements of Snail-oyster: with snail as vehicle, Snail-oyster engage in a slow, considered perusal of space through time, with their ocular apparatus (eyes at the ends of fleshy tentacles) guiding the route through the intertidal. While “considered” implies a kind of thought that some readers might reject as applicable to a periwinkle, I challenge such anthropocentric dismissal of the snail’s epistemological abilities. A



snail’s eyes may not “see” the world in the same way that human eyes do, but they nonetheless enable the snail to perceive and respond to information in the environment.

Similarly, when drawing, I engage in a slow, considered visual “movement” across the surface of each subject (e.g., an oyster shell), pausing the route of my gaze to investigate cracks in the nacre here, shifts in colour there, or ghostly radial etchings over there, where barnacles were attached. Through deep attention, my eyes “touch” the shell’s surface and transfer visual information via my hand into another visual representation that honours the subject while also offering a subjective interpretation. In effect, this visual interpretation is a document of my relationship with and affective response to the subject.

These actions perhaps comprise a slant version of what Eva Hayward calls “fingeryeyes,” a term she coined to describe a “haptic-optic” experiential knowing that

explain[s] the tentacular viscosity of cross-species encounters and [that] name[s] the synaesthetic quality of materialized sensation. [...] Stirred by the ripples of investigation that emerge in the arrangement that we may touch, senses are amalgamated [...] forging cross-species reticulations and sites of solid-arity. (2010, 580)

Though I do not touch the shells while drawing, my attention is focused on each singular and often minute element, as I optically “feel” my way over the surface. I reticulate the shell’s surface visually, not unlike the way that snails—and Snail-oyster—reticulate the surface of the intertidal via eyestalks and foot. I feel my awareness/perception “move” over the shell’s surface, while I am also “moved” on an affective level.

One of Hayward’s catalysts for her theory of interspecies “solid-arity” is Donna Haraway’s concept of “metaplasm,” which, as Hayward explains,

entails the constitutive enactment of ontology and epistemology, materiality and intelligibility, substance and form, fungibility and sustainability. [...] Metaplasm is the intertwining and enmeshing of noumena and phenomena; that is, metaplasm is about materially activated—moving matter—ways of being, doing, and knowing. [...] [M]etaplasm begins in the sensual and carnal intercourse between and among species, constantly changing and reworking boundaries between subject and object, us and them, there and here, me and it. (2008, 77)

Drawing can be understood as a means of reworking the boundary between artist and subject. As a representation of the mollusc shell emerges via my hand, mediated by my eyes and brain, I draw closer to mollusc ways of being, doing and, possibly, knowing. Drawing may thus be a metaplastic kind of “doing nothing” that further aids in humans’ understanding their place in a bioregion, and that suggests that boundaries between species are not solid or certain. Hayward elaborates, stating that the concept of metaplasm “attends to the ways that enactors (enfused actors: constitutive of each other while differentiated: doing and knowing while being) constitute themselves through assemblages composed from biological and phenomenological entanglements” (2008, 77). Entangled together, Snail-oyster moved slowly as one being yet had different ontologies and epistemologies; I am entangled with them, as a human lifeform observing them in the same bioregion. Despite having a different epistemological viewpoint, I recognize our mutuality, facilitated through attention and through drawing, both of which remind me of my place in space and time.

In suggesting the metaphoric potential of Snail-oyster, I also acknowledge metaphor’s limits. Metaphor may be expansive, serving to extend language toward considering how two disparate objects are similar when viewed in a particular way. As Hayward reminds us,



“metaphor is a displacement: a nominative term is displaced from its everyday context and placed elsewhere so as to illuminate some other context through its reconfiguration. Thus, the relationship is based on the relationship of ideas rather than objects—metaphor does not owe any allegiance to the literal object” (2008, 74). Certain aspects of Snail-oyster’s being, then, may be set aside to serve the metaphor (e.g., the molluscs’ sizes indicate that they did not live very long, perhaps because the oyster was too onerous a burden for the periwinkle to bear—a point that may weaken the part of my argument regarding the benefits of reciprocity).

However, animals as metaphors may also further the goals of de-anthropocentric theories and praxes. Hayward also considers Akira Mizuta Lippit’s theory of the “animetaphor,” a term that is “a play on ‘anti-metaphor’ and ‘animal metaphor,’” and which signifies that “animals exceed metaphoricity” (2008, 78). In metaphors, Hayward elaborates, “[a]nimals expose the limits of representation. Lippit shows how animality, animal spirits, and organisms themselves reside as real within representations” (ibid.). In other words, no matter how humans might attempt to describe more-than-human animals, they always-already exist beyond discourse. In recognizing this, through the “resisting-in-place” vehicle of Snail-oyster, for example, a metaphor may be all the more humbling: “The animetaphor, the living metaphor, is always pointing to a space [...] outside language, exposing the limits of language” (79). Human ways of knowing and doing are limited; I recognize that molluscs know themselves better than I possibly can, even after devoting several attentive hours to observing their remains.

As a form of attention that honours relationships and exceeds discourse, drawing is a form of representation that is never quite complete or comprehensive. While drawing is a “phenomenological mode of encountering” and an epistemological process that may facilitate ontological transformations (both in the human artist, who “sees” differently because of the encounter, and in the subject of the drawing, who is reproduced subjectively by the artist), drawing is also a means of coming to an awareness that Western/White human exceptionalism is false, which may lead to a sense of humility. As object-oriented ontology philosopher Timothy Morton suggests, humans might try to “release the anthropocentric copyright control on the gap” between more-than-human lifeforms and our conception and representation of them, “which means dropping the idea that (human) thought is the top access mode and holding that brushing against, licking, [and] irradiating are also access modes as valid (or as invalid) as thinking” (2017, 11). By extension, the knowledge gained/produced through meditative awareness and through drawing is as valid (or invalid) as knowledge produced via discourse and language, including metaphor.

Ultimately, Snail-oyster as metaphor may “mobilize, differentiate, and yet entangle lived bodies and language and foreground the intercorporeality of sensible matter and sensual meaning” (Hayward 2008, 82). In other words, the material bonding of the two mollusc species is a concrete reminder of how all lifeforms (and non-living things) are interrelated and interdependent, and that the boundaries between us are always permeable, subject to change, or perhaps irrelevant in the context of the Anthropocene, and more precisely, the pandemic and the climate crisis.

Maintenance, not Growth (Toward Degrowth)

Snail-oyster, then, may inspire some humans to aim to limit activities to within our bioregions, effecting a kind of “resistance-in-place” through (non-)actions like attention that “sustain and



maintain” (Odell 2019, 27). These correspond with practices proposed by advocates of the degrowth movement. As Susan Paulson et al. explain, the “[g]oals of degrowth are to reduce harm to humans and other nature by voluntarily slowing down global use of materials and energy, and to reorient values, institutions, and worldviews around equitable well-being” (2020, 1). The authors cite a report by the Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), which states:

The crisis we face as a global community must be understood not only as a public health crisis, or as an economic crisis of the capitalist mode of production, but also, fundamentally, as a crisis of the reproduction of life. In this sense, it is a crisis of care: the work of caring for humans, non-humans, and the shared biosphere. (2)

Degrowth, then, also operates as maintenance, with an emphasis on sustainable lifeways and maintenance of the life force, which, according to Odell, “is concerned with cyclicity, care, and regeneration” (2019, 26).

Paulson et al. advocate for substantial changes to policy, including “Green New Deals, work-sharing and reduced working hours, universal public services, support of community economies, and basic care incomes” (2020, 2). They also emphasize the need to “[curb] resource-intensive and ecologically damaging aspects of current economies,” arguing that humans must “move beyond choices of jobs versus environment toward politics that address viable livelihoods as inseparable from sustainable ecosystems” (5). The degrowth movement, then, appears to prioritize equally social and ecological justice, which is somewhat radical in the tacit implication of a de-anthropocentrizing theory-praxis. The false dichotomy of “jobs vs. environment” is perhaps similar to that of jobs and pandemic “circuit breaker” measures that, while limiting certain freedoms and causing some temporary job losses, has helped to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

If the interdependence of all lifeforms is always-already given, any degrowth movement must aim to disconnect from anthropocentric paradigms to be equitable across species. Indeed, to achieve equity, degrowth also needs to decolonize. As Cree scholar and poet Billy-Ray Belcourt argues, “we cannot dismantle speciesism or re-imagine human-animal relations in the North American context without first or simultaneously dismantling settler colonialism and re-theorizing domesticated animal bodies as *colonial subjects* that must be centered in decolonial thought” (2015, 3). Consequently, a degrowth movement requires strategies that avoid replicating neoliberal, late-capitalist, and colonial paradigms, including those that have determined the kinds of relationships that humans and more-than-humans may have. Following from Belcourt, degrowth should also hold space for and even prioritize Indigenous peoples’ ontologies and epistemologies, including notions of reciprocity and relationship.

Paulson et al. do seem to realize that effective degrowth solutions are works-in-progress when they ask: “What will it take to shift priorities toward saving human and ecological resources?” (2020, 6). Yet, their use of the word “resources” implies that they may still be looking through a capitalist/colonial lens, and that work needs to be done to de-anthropocentrize and decolonize the degrowth movement. Their question might be answered in many ways, with input from various stakeholders, including Indigenous knowledge keepers. Metaphors involving more-than-human lifeforms might help “ground” the degrowth movement as it works toward achieving de-anthropocentrizing and decolonizing goals. Perhaps degrowth movements should be localized, with theories and strategies addressing particular needs of different bioregions, while still recognizing the need to view the climate crisis as a global



problem. Indeed, degrowth movements in nations, territories, or other state-governed lands with a history and present of colonialism should prioritize returning stolen lands to Indigenous peoples. In addition to addressing some of the ethical and Treaty rights issues surrounding reconciliation, “Land Back” would also contribute to conservation efforts (of old-growth forests, for example), maintaining biodiversity, and sequestering carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions (FAO and FILAC 2021; King 2019; Lakota People’s Law Project 2020; Veit 2021). As the Lakota People’s Law Project (2020) states, “revitalization of Indigenous [land] management techniques is a critical piece of a more sustainable path forward.”

The above quote from Belcourt refers to domesticated animals, but his statement might be expanded to include animals who are more fully self-willed, such as Snail-oyster. In considering Snail-oyster (as metaphor) and their mollusc relatives (as subjects of my drawings) in the context of their own bioregion/ecological niche, I hope I have avoided reproducing the epistemological framework of other White settler-colonizers that Belcourt critiques, in which “animals are ‘always being interpellated by [spatial] recognition’ to deploy animal bodies as settler-colonial utilities” (2015, 3). By living in proximity to Snail-oyster’s intertidal habitat, and by spending time there attentive to its changes and observing *in situ* the living animals, I have attempted to consider these more-than-humans on their own terms. Perhaps my only act of “domestication” or “utilization” consists in bringing the empty shells into my studio to draw them; upon completing the drawings, I return the shells to the beach, to be diminished by waves and weather till they become sand, thus contributing anew to the bioregion. However, I recognize that my perspective may change as I continue to educate myself about decolonization and Indigenous lifeways.

Conclusion

In simple terms, I believe, like Odell, “that capitalism, colonialist thinking, loneliness, and an abusive stance toward the environment all coproduce one another”; I would add only that *ongoing* colonialist practices are also contributing to the climate crisis (2019, xviii). Perhaps foremost, addressing the Anthropocene and its attendant crises means that humans, particularly privileged, White-settler humans in industrialized countries, must abandon anthropocentric paradigms that commodify more-than-human animals and instead recognize the inherent selfhood of these beings and what their ontologies may teach us. In simple terms, perhaps we need to (re-)learn humility—one of the seven foundational Sacred or “Grandfather Teachings” in Anishinaabeg cultures on Turtle Island. In the Anishinaabeg language, humility is “dбаadendiziwin” and

is represented by the wolf. For the wolf, life is lived for his pack and the ultimate shame is to be outcast. Humility is to know that you are a sacred part of creation. Live life selflessly and not selfishly. Respect your place [...] Do not become arrogant and self-important. Find balance within yourself and all living things. (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence n.d., n.p.)³

Humans are advised to mind the wolf, respecting all lifeforms and place. Each of the concepts in the Seven Grandfather Teachings is represented by an animal, highlighting similarities between an idea and a material, living body. Like the other animal-concept figures in the teachings, humility-as-wolf is thus a kind of metaphor, suggesting that the boundary between human and more-than-human in Anishinaabeg epistemology is fluid and non-anthropocentric.



As a metaphor and as onto-epistemological being(s), Snail-oyster have taught me about interdependence and maintenance, reminding me that the scale of Western/privileged human activities needs to shrink as we attempt to solve the problems of the Anthropocene. My intertidal roving has also contributed to my (re-)recognition that joy can be experienced in redirecting attention to the more-than-human world. I also recognize that I am privileged to have a body that, despite bouts of injury-related pain, permits me to access areas that others cannot due to mobility issues. I am also privileged to be living in a rural area where I can easily access the shore, and I know that not everyone shares this privilege, whether because they live in land-locked cities or because waterfronts have been co-opted by private residential, commercial, or industrial development. Yet, as Odell’s personal examples indicate, connection with the more-than-human world can happen in urban places: she first recognized her appreciation for birds by watching crows on the balcony of her Oakland, California, apartment.

Consideration of the Anthropocene is perhaps fundamentally an exercise in humility. As Morton states, “*Ecological* awareness is knowing that there are a bewildering variety of scales, temporal and spatial, and that the human ones are only a very narrow region of a much larger and necessarily inconsistent and varied scalar possibility space, and that the human scale is not the top scale” (2017, 186). The Anthropocene, one of many “-cenes” in the geologic timescale of the planet, stands as only one such temporal-spatial scale, underscoring humankind’s place as anything but top. We have not been on Earth long: *Homo sapiens* is estimated to have existed for 200,000 years, while the first molluscs may have lived 560 million years ago (CBC News 2006, n.p.). Yet, if humans in cultures premised on “growth” capitalism and colonialism continue, we may not be here much longer. As Judith Butler discusses in *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020),

the thriving that is bound up with human life is connected to the thriving of non-human creatures; human and non-human life are also related by virtue of the living processes they are, they share, and they require [...] The political concept of self-preservation [...] does not consider that the preservation of the self requires the preservation of the earth, and that we are not “in” the global environment as self-subsisting beings, but subsist only as long as the planet does. (199)

In a recent interview, Butler re-contextualizes the above thoughts in consideration of the climate crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, asking, “What needs to change in order for all lives to be worthy of flourishing and protected from preventable death?” (The Culture of Grief research centre 2020, n.p.). Beyond the pandemic, answers to her question and the one posed by advocates of degrowth might be found by shifting from an individualistic anthropocentrism to a recognition of interdependence and reciprocity—perhaps, like Snail-oyster, one small, grounded step at a time.

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continue to learn from Indigenous artists, scholars, writers, and Elders.

Notes

1. Epekwitk is translated as “something resting on the water,” “cradled by the water/waves,” or sometimes “cradle on the water/waves.” See Government of Prince Edward Island website, “History and culture,” <https://www.tourismpei.com/pei-history>.
2. In the context of the neoliberal capitalist Anthropocene, our agency may be constrained by the roles that this system allows. Those earning minimum wage, for example, have less agency than their billionaire employers. The new category of “essential worker” in the context of the pandemic has had specious fluidity, as supermarket cashiers saw their wages increase during the first wave, only to watch it return to the previous rate and stay there even as the second wave proved far riskier and deadlier.
3. Other organizations and individuals offer similar information, including the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi and James Vukelich Kaagegaabaw, who posts “Ojibwe Word of the Day” videos on Facebook (see Works Cited).

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**Hacking the Anthropocene:
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"Snail-oyster": Theories, Metaphors, and Praxes for
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Jane Affleck

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JANE AFFLECK, PhD, is a settler-Canadian living in Prince Edward Island, unceded Mi'kmaq territory. She is a sessional instructor at UPEI and a visual artist. Her writing has appeared in publications including *The Great Lakes Review*, *C Magazine*, *The Side View*, and *visual arts news* and her visual artwork in recent group exhibitions in Kijipuktuk (Halifax), Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), and Charlottetown. Visit www.jane-affleck.com to learn more.