

# End Times and Beginnings: A Retrospective and Relaunch

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## *In the Beginning...*

In 1988, a group of intrepid graduate students in the Faculty of Environmental Studies, at York University in Toronto, Canada, conceived and launched *UnderCurrents*. The founders' main objective was to provide a space for alternative, critical, and creative explorations of environmental issues, thinking, action, and scholarship. Although many of the theoretical and conceptual tools to enable such a project were only in embryonic form, the founding editors sought to destabilize the ontological and epistemological moorings of some stubbornly persistent signifiers, including "nature," "wilderness," and "environment." Direct action environmentalism of previous decades, though visceral, corporeal, and essential, had proven insufficient in the heady days of Reagan's culture wars. The founding editors understood this implicitly, and launched

*UnderCurrents* as both a material and discursive salvo. This wasn't their parents' environmentalism.

Such a project was necessary given the socio-political, cultural, and socio-ecological impasse faced by critical scholars and activists in the West. With the post-war consensus in tatters given the persistent, though waning, storm of cold war politics, a scattered system was consolidating around an even more regressive constellation of cultural, economic, social, and environmental politics. A new era of neoliberal revanchism was rolling out across the globe, and that infamous tripartite of Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney was making it rain.

Thatcher, the Queen of the neoclassical epigones, seemed particularly confident in her clairvoyance. The serendipitous rise of

a casual phrase, "there is no alternative," had, by the late 1980s, become doctrine. Fukuyama's 1989 essay, "The End of History?" added punctuation to the end of a regressive decade, and a certain kind of authority to Thatcher's indictment on imagination. A lesser-summoned, though as egregious Thatcherism put a fine point on the state of affairs: "There is no such thing" as society, she proclaimed. Certainly bad news for society. But where did this leave the environment?

## *Evolution of 'The Environment'*

Rachel Carson's breathtaking work, refracted through the broader cultural politics of Paris, 1968, set the stage for a decade of relatively robust environmental politics. By the start of the 1970s, a young professor of genetics

at the University of British Columbia was becoming radicalized and re-dedicating himself to environmental issues, and eventually, the David Suzuki Foundation. The inaugural Earth Day was observed in 1970. Greenpeace launched in Victoria, British Columbia in 1971. DDT was banned in the US in 1972. By the mid-1970s, environmentalism had moved substantially away from the first wave of conservationism and the long hangover of the garden city movement. The spatiality of Nature was being subtly recast, and along with this came the seismic realization that if Nature wasn't out there somewhere, it must be here. The environment was no longer only a national park, but instead imbricated with everyday life.

"Hey farmer, farmer, put away that DDT now. Give me spots on my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees," sang Joni Mitchell in her 1970 hit, "Big Yellow Taxi." On the one hand, the song clearly resonated with listeners in the global north, making prolonged appearances on the pop charts in Canada, the US, and Europe. On the other hand, this was Carson's thick scientific analysis squeezed through the thin politics of hippie utopianism. The song might also be cast as the thin edge of a rapidly encroaching wedge of bourgeois, consumer politics that would reduce second wave environmentalism to a

caricature of itself in decades to come. Slightly blemished produce is, after all, once again de rigueur—a consumer-driven short hand for enlightened urban progressivism, broader machinations of the industrialized and exploitative organics sector be damned.

And yet, Mitchell's paved over paradise also hints at a more substantive shift in the environmental politics of the 1970s in the global north. The leaky ontological corners of the "environment" box had been exposed, and were rapidly disintegrating. Environmentalism now shot through contemporary life—it was legislative and regulatory politics; it was mass movement; it was, as the spotty apple indicates, even ingested. Intimately internalized. And perhaps, most distinctively, environmentalism was a massified, pop cultural touchstone. In this latter respect, we might have good reason to be nostalgic about the good ole' days of 1970s environmentalism—a decade in which the movement may have hit its apex of broad appeal. Who can, after all, imagine a current top 40 hit warning of the dangers of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane?<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the decade, however, and with the pressures of stagflation mounting, the stage was set for the juggernaut of roll back neoliberalism. At the same time, popular concern for the environment, often a bellweather for overall socio-economic stability, began to wane, substantially undercutting the potential for a broadly defined citizen movement to insulate against the regressive socio-environmental politics to come. The timing couldn't have been worse, given that Reagan's gutting of environmental policies and departments was an unambiguous assault on socio-environmental justice.

At home, Canadians were under the reign of the so-called "greenest Prime Minister." From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Brian Mulroney's government was instrumental in arranging the Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987), persuaded a reluctant Reagan to address issues of acid rain, and called the Cod Moratorium (1992). Lest we get too dewy-eyed about

Mulroney's environmental bona fides, it is worth noting that his environmental politics were of the high ecological modernist variety—not at all surprising then that the organization to crown him as the greenest Prime Minister was the Corporate Knights cabal, champions themselves of so-called "clean capitalism." Environmentalism would emerge through the machinations of 1980s Reaganomics a transmogrified version of its 1970s self: in tact, though with a substantive and genuinely incompatible capitalist caveat in tow.

The academy was scrambling to make sense of this emerging world, and the founding editorial collective of *UnderCurrents* did not, in 1988, have the rich body of conceptual and theoretical interventions that constitute the historical legacy of the intervening years. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" was still being digested. As was Neil Smith's *Uneven Development*, in which he elaborates the provocative production of nature thesis. The most enduring work of Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick had yet to be written. Lefebvre's work remained untranslated and unknown to most of the English world. David Harvey was only a couple of books into his now prolific body of work and William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* was three years away. Spivak was just entering her most productive decade. No one had heard of Slavoj Žižek. Many seminal fields and areas of research indispensable to transdisciplinary understandings of environments, including science studies, ecocriticism, critical animal studies, ecofeminism, political ecology, urban political ecology, queer nature theory, ecopedagogy, and critical urban studies had yet to even take form. Indeed the scholarly bookends of the late 1980s and early 1990s might well be Fukuyama's end of history thesis—the essay length submission in 1989, mentioned above, and the full length book treatment published in 1992.

Despite twenty-five years of inspired scholarly and activist incursions around the globe aimed at remedying, repairing, and transforming global socio-ecologies, objective conditions may be worse now than

when *UnderCurrents* was launched. And although our brief retrospective of the context in which *UnderCurrents* has developed incorporates only western perspectives and remains grossly incomplete, we believe that the broad strokes of mainstream environmental politics established in the 1980s remain doggedly rooted in the contemporary period—having changed little in kind, though significantly in magnitude. Yes, scholars, activists, and others continue to struggle for justice, and yes, our efforts have occasionally been punctuated by success. Yet, as we write, the continuation of state sanctioned, corporate complicit violence against human and more-than-human environments in both the global north and south is difficult to ignore.

### *The Environment Evolving*

Since its inception, *UnderCurrents* has presented work that aims to change destructive trends in society by rethinking human/environment relations. The imaginative and discursive project of the journal has centered on a redefinition of what we mean when we say environment and, by extension, what it means to be human (See *UnderCurrents* Issue 1, "Introduction"). This is no small task, and for twenty-five years the editorial collective, contributors, and readers of *UnderCurrents* have struggled with, intervened in, and added to the crucial debates that now provide the backdrop for the re-launch of the journal. Beginning in 1988 with "Human Interaction with the Natural Environment," *UnderCurrents* has utilized topical themes to encourage work that pushes against notions of the environment as passive, usable stuff, including volumes devoted to: "Representation and Domination of Nature" (1991), "Situated Knowledge" (1992), "Queer Nature" (1994), "The Nature of Science" (1996), "Political Natures" (2000), "Planning, Culture and Space" (2007), and "Animal" (2008). While early contributors to and editors of the journal used the language of anthropomorphism to grapple with understanding nature/human relations,

they found this language too structural, too binary to describe the complex interactions, systems, and concepts that they were trying to reimagine. So they pulled from, and contributed to, the emerging critical environmental discourse that characterized the transition into the twenty-first century. In so doing, they contributed to the development of critical environmental studies as a robust and evolving field.

After a brief hiatus from 2008 until 2012, *UnderCurrents* is back. And while much has changed since the launch of the journal twenty-five years ago, much remains the same. The contemporary period presents no shortage of scholarly or political impasses. In Canada, the Conservative government's multi-pronged and revanchist approach to the environment, led and championed by Stephan Harper, has actively facilitated unprecedented resource extraction, gutted federal environmental assessment agencies and policies, defunded environmental groups that threaten the government's agenda, and deliberately silenced environmental

catastrophes, such as the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the fuel train derailment in Lac Megantic, Quebec, and the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear power plant that followed the 2011 tsunami in Japan, continue to impact human and more-than-human life in devastating and previously unimagined ways. We are facing decidedly retrograde policy and political issues, but within the context of a dramatically worse ecological reality. As we argue over the size of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (depending on what one classifies as "garbage") and deliberate about the "acceptable" limits of radiation exposure for children, it becomes clear that we are still in desperate need of new tools for imagining, understanding, discussing, and reframing the environment. *UnderCurrents'* goal is to draw on the theoretical, artistic, and practical tools available from critical environmental scholarship and beyond, so that we might begin to understand the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, or Lac Megantic, or Fukushima, as at

to dismantle the boundaries between the human and more-than-human, to explore and expose the cracks in our conception of the environment as "out there." The scholarly interventions to which our founding editors contributed have resulted in sharper conceptual, discursive, and imaginative tools. At the same time, these tools have revealed the intimate interconnectivity and stunning messiness of environmental issues. Our task, then, is to carry the torch of advocacy for the more-than-human world while simultaneously pursuing an understanding of the myriad hybridities among ecological injustice and social, cultural, and political injustices by presenting radical scholarship that helps to define the evolving discourse of environmentalism. One of the ways that we do this is by making space for creative, poetic, and visual work that engages in a critical way with this discourse, whether or not that work fits into traditional academic models.

To belabour the point briefly: We are unequivocally and intentionally a scholarly journal, inasmuch as we have routinized publishing criteria, attend to issues of conventional scholarly concern, employ a rigorous peer review process, and strive to make important empirical, theoretical, and methodological interventions in a more-or-less bounded field and related sub-disciplines. While we retain these particular conventions, we categorically reject others as an explicitly political act—as an effort to model a more just, inclusive, and ultimately incisive scholarship. This is as much prefigurative as it is pedagogical for the *UnderCurrents* Collective, and as we learn more about the process of academic publishing, we commit to being open and iterative in our struggle to enact alternatives. For the time being, however, we animate our modest efforts to shake up the staid state of scholarly journal publishing through three means: (1) We commit to a radical epistemology that values knowledges from dispersed and disparate sources; (2) We are a student-run collective committed to democratic and inclusive decision making processes, and; (3) We now publish in an Open Source Journal

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scientists and scholars. As a result, once radical environmental activists are forced to quiet their criticisms or, as David Suzuki has done, step down from their positions within charitable environmental foundations for fear of having their charitable status revoked for being "too political." In the almost fifty years since Rachel Carson died from breast cancer related complications, and despite extensive evidence of the causal relationship between the production of chemicals and the incidence of endocrine diseases and cancer, the annual global production of chemicals continues to increase exponentially, with no signs of slowing down.<sup>3</sup> Environmental

once environmental, social, ethical, technological, industrial, economic, and catastrophic. We will create new tools when we find those already available to be lacking.

### *UnderCurrents, The Next Twenty-Five Years*

The role of *UnderCurrents* as a space for critical environmental studies is more crucial now than ever before and we see ourselves contributing to the development of a discourse that has been, and continues to be, marginalized (for all of the reasons listed above). This is a self-consciously political act in two ways. First, *UnderCurrents* continues

format and make our back catalogue digitally accessible online, which respects both the labour of scholarship and the profound potential of public information.

The second way we see ourselves contributing to a broader politics of change, as the theme of this volume suggests, is by providing a space for creative and critical scholarship that tries to address the environmental consequences—and to work through some of the unfathomable losses—that have resulted from decades of bad policy, government inaction, and wanton resource extraction. Our aim is to acknowledge the grief, horror, and anger that exist in response to the decimation and displacement of populations of humans and more-than-human beings, the destruction of places, the poisoning of our air, water, and soil, and the widening gap between those who have and those who have not. In doing so, we aim to explore alternative approaches to understanding and acting in the world, and to generate a hopefulness about our collective future. Such hopefulness is not centered on blind faith in the ability of the planet to weather the storm of human need and greed, but instead accepts the reparative and generative powers of sitting with loss, focuses on the ability of publics to act in meaningful and profound ways, and insists on the intrinsic value of all beings and things, human or non. As part of our commitment to the exploration of new imaginative, theoretical, and creative strategies for engaging with critical environmental studies, our current ecological and sociological reality requires that we contemplate and try to deal with environmental loss beyond this special themed volume.

The varied contributions to *UnderCurrents'* 18th volume “End

Times and Beginnings” take apocalypse as a starting point, and, we think, provide a wonderful new beginning for the journal. In particular, the artistic and scholarly works included in this volume create moments of uncanny symmetry, challenging the reader to consider each contribution in relation to one another rather than as stand-alone imaginative or theoretical forays in critical environmental studies. For example, Michael Young opens his essay “(Mis)reading revelations: Apocalyptic Visions and Environmental Crisis,” an extended call for the revelatory power of apocalyptic imagery for environmentalism, with an image of thousands of birds falling dead from the sky. Jessica Marion Barr’s documentation of her art instillation “Augury : Elegy” echoes this image, to chilling affect, as she challenges the viewer to see aesthetic and potentially abhorrent enactments of ecological mourning and grief as a way forward, as a call to action. Taken together, these works require that the reader consider the same event—the sudden death of over 4000 blackbirds in Beebe, Arkansas on New Years Eve, 2011—in two imaginative directions simultaneously. The reverberations created between these two works, as well as the many others that resonate through this volume, speak directly to the aesthetic and political intentions of *UnderCurrents*: by at once chipping away at the divisions between the human and more-than-human and providing the opportunity for experimental and artistic work to interact with more traditional forms of environmental scholarship, we aim to engage in the ongoing radical reformulation and evolution of critical environmental studies.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> While “Big Yellow Taxi” has remained an enduring anthem for a particular brand of Canadian environmentalism, there are, of course, many songs with environmentalist intentions that have enjoyed popularity on pop charts—too many to list here in fact. However, the commercial music industry relies on the ability of the listener to appropriate what they hear and make it relevant to their own experience. As a result, political, environmental, or social justice themes are often scaled back by music producers and executives, and radio and television stations, regardless of the artist’s intention. For a discussion of how music messages get co-opted see Mark Pedelty’s *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment*. For an extensive discussion of the relationship between North American music and environmentalism see David Ingram’s *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960*.

<sup>3</sup> A 1995 report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development asserts that, “[n]ot only has the number of chemicals increased dramatically over the past 20 years or so, but so have the quantities ... that are produced. Global production of organic chemicals, for example, increased from about 1 million tonnes a year in the 1930s to 7 million in 1950, 63 million in 1970 and about 250 million in 1985. Annual production now tends to double every seven or eight years” (22). In 2004, a joint report generated by Environment Canada and Health Canada estimated that between 1930 and 2000, the global annual production of chemicals increased 400-fold, and mostly without environmental or health assessments.

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