



# Vol. 11, Issue 2

# October 2018



**Vol. 11, Issue 2  
October 2018**

**Editor:**

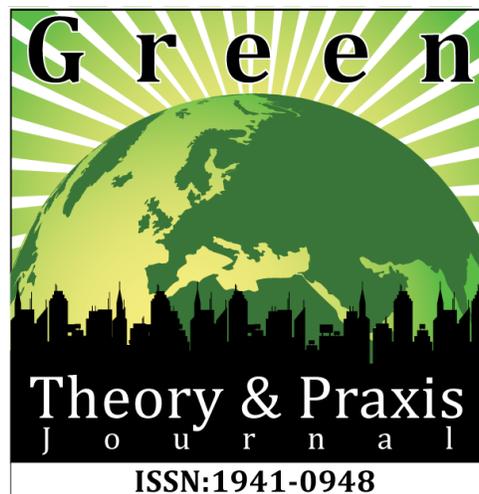
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Vol. 11, Issue 2  
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**Visions on civilizational collapse: Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's tale *The New Robinson Crusoes***

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Keywords: Civilizational Collapse, Post Collapse Literature, Suffering, Surviving, Refugees, Rural Life, Russian Literature, *Locus Non Amoenus*

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**Abstract**

The end of the world as we know it takes many different forms in literature. In recent years, many authors have focused on the consequences of a civilizational collapse in our society, and the ways in which we try to survive. In this paper, we analyze the unique vision of collapse presented by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya in her tale *The New Robinson Crusoes*, which follows a family who go back to nature to find salvation in a crisis context. We consider all the challenges they face to survive in the *locus non amoenus* they and their few fellow survivors inhabit. Also, the author gives us a set of ethical guidelines on how to survive in a hostile environment amid a post-apocalyptic landscape. In this paper we present them in the form of a Decalogue that could serve as a guide to how humanity should evolve if it intends to face the challenges posed by the twenty-first century.

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An apparent aim of Russian literature is to remind us that one of our eternal partner in life is suffering. From the romantic dilemmas in Pushkin's poems and plays to the tortured characters in Dostoyevsky's novels; from the personal betrayals in Tolstoy's works to the insane tension and pain of Andrey Biely's plots, suffering never abandons us. During the Silver Age of Russian literature, suffering takes on a grim aspect in the works and lives of leading authors. Prime examples, among many others we could mention, are the poems and experiences of Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam; and, if we refer to the literature of exile, the novels and essays of Solzhenitsyn.

Russian literature seems to want to answer an unasked question: *What is the meaning of suffering?*

Among contemporary authors the question remains the same, but some of them have found different ways to answer it. Sergei Dovlatov, in his "novel" (more accurately, a collection of tales) *The Suitcase (Chemodan)*, satirically narrates the bittersweet story of his life in the USSR; Andrei Gelasimov, in his novel *Thirst (Zhazhda)*, deals with the wounds of the Chechen war through the everyday life of an alcoholic former soldier whose face is covered with second-degree burns; Vladimir Sorokin, in *Day of the Oprichnik (Den Oprichnika)*, uses the past to deduce the future in a dystopian futuristic Russia full of political purges; and finally, Anna Starobinets, in her novel *The Living (Zhivushij)*, also takes us into the future to show us the black mirror of reality of a post collapse world in which social networks are the new KGB.

Among this new wave of writers we are still discovering an author who defies easy categorization: Ludmilla Petrushevskaya. She has been defined as "one of the most controversial prose writers and dramatists in Russia" (Woll, 1993, p. 125) and criticized for presenting a naked and outrageous view of her characters' reality, a view very rarely found among female writers in recent decades. Her prose has even been described as "anti-ladylike".

Petrushevskaya has many detractors, for example, Olga Slavnikova (2001, p. 61) cannot find anything original in Petrushevskaya's works and denounces the excess in her books: "Her books are catalogues of various diseases, calamities, crying injustices." As a literary figure, Petrushevskaya is controversial and difficult to categorize for many reasons, some of which have to do with her peculiar biography. She started to write, in her own words, "late", when she was almost 30 years old and when many of her contemporaries were already recognized authors (Grekova, 1997, p. 164). Famous mostly for her short stories, she is also well-known as the author of many acclaimed and award-winning novels, plays, and screenplays, while also being an occasional painter and cabaret singer. Her subject matters are also wide-ranging, from realistic to fantastic. She has described the decadent and selfish *intelligentsia* in *Our Crowd (Svoi Krug)*, and portrayed a loving mother in the claustrophobic atmosphere of a communist apartment in *The Time: Night (Vremia Noch)*. She has written tales of love and family in *Immortal Love (Besmertnaya Liubov)*, highly original stories of pain, fear and nightmares in her short-story collections such as *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby (Dva Tsarstva)*, and even fairy tales such as her screenplay for *A Fairy Tale of Fairy Tales (Skazka Skazok)*, an animated film from 1979 directed by Yuri Norstein.

In the words of Lipovetsky (quoted by Smith, 2003, p. 229), Ludmilla Petrushevskaya takes her place within the Russian postmodernist tradition: “This type of fiction shares a number of features with postmodernism, such as parody, an impulse towards playfulness, an emphasis on the relativity of time and space, and a hypertrophied dialogism that brings into conflict various versions of events and their interpretations, all the while juxtaposing genres, styles, and the voices of both the characters as well as the equally empowered voice of the author.” (Lipovetsky, 1999 p. 243).

As regards suffering, in Ludmilla Petrushevskaya’s stories it is possible to find something new that has much to do with critical reactions to her work. According to Parts (2005, p. 78), “she is considered to present an “unfeeling” stance toward the events she presented”. Opinions on the reasons behind this stance vary among scholars: some maintain that the author’s harshness is “saturated with pain”, while others argue that it is merely a sign of indifference (Parts, 2005, p. 78).

This paper does not intend to explore the reasons for her special view of suffering. In any case, she offers a unique opportunity to contemplate the suffering of others through a prism of indifference. Even though the events she narrates are sometimes terrifying, pitiful and worthy of our compassion, the apathetic narrative tone can either overwhelm the reader or allows him/her to simply analyze what is happening and why. Thus we could say the reader is free to learn amid the suffering (as we can sometimes read between the lines) and that her special perspective is an invitation to reflect so that the message is not obscured by a curtain of tears.

One of her most well-known tales, included in the collection *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor’s Baby*, is *The New Robinson Crusoes (Novye Robinsony)*. This story was published for the first time in 1989, in the edition of the Russian literary journal *Novy Mir* where Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago (Arhipelag GULag)* also first appeared (Hernández, 2011, pp. 10-11). In Clowes (1995, p. 146) we discover that the tale once had a subtitle: “The New Robinsons: A Chronicle of the End of the 20th Century”. To a certain extent, this story represents an anomaly within her oeuvre and offers the reader some degree of relief by abandoning the claustrophobic spaces of Russian apartments and dysfunctional family relationships, the same as those she experienced during her childhood (Grekova, 1997, p. 164).

According to Smith (2003, p. 232), “Dalton-Brown identifies two prevalent modes of postmodernist writing prevalent in Russia today: the dystopian (or apocalyptic text) and the mythical text.” This tale could be easily identified as dystopian.

Even though “The raw material of her texts are dysfunctional families, broken hopes, abandoned children, sick mothers, misery, and destitution, all of which produce an effect of unrelieved gloom” (Parts, 2005, p. 83), in this tale the reader faces something new.

On the contrary, the three family members at the center of the story, although not exempt from conflicts, work together in their fight for survival. Father, mother, and teenage daughter have fled from a city –probably Moscow– and find themselves trying to survive an unspecified disaster in “a lost and forgotten little village beyond the Moria river” “gluhuju i zabroshennuju, kuda-to za rechku Moru.”

Yet the atmosphere in the countryside is no less claustrophobic than in a small Stalinist apartment. They experience the *locus non amoenus* in a place full of menace, strife, and hunger. To paraphrase Clowes (1995, p. 147), Petrushevskaya's tale constitutes a rereading of a cornerstone of Western modernity, Defoe's *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.

What is this *locus non amoenus* and why is it so unpleasant for them? The reason in this case is clear and also a common theme in Russian literature throughout the ages: the *intelligentsia* can only survive in an urban context in their circles of universities, research institutes, associations and so on. If they are confronted with a collapse (civilizational, or due to a war, dictatorship, or disease) they are useless and helpless.

We have seen this many times. For example, in Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales (Kolymskie raskazy)* (1995), a series of terrible tales of hunger, death, violence and horror in the Siberian *gulag* near the Kolyma mines, the former poets, musicians, engineers, and philologists are a new group of "good for nothings" in an environment of wild nature and manual labor. In fact, the only redemption they can find is to pretend to be woodworkers so they can spend a couple of days near the stove, as in the story entitled *Carpenters*.

A similar situation is also described by Dostoyevsky in *Memoirs from the House of the Dead, (Zapiski iz myortvogo doma)*, which narrates the lives of convicts in a Siberian prison camp.

When social constructs collapse, being a member of the privileged class is not necessarily an advantage. In fact, it could be even a disadvantage when Others, those who were not so privileged, identify you as a member of that social class.

Collapse seems to be a magic wand that generates a tabula rasa with all classes, nationalities and races, which in turn makes us aware how weak we are and how fragile is the bubble in which we live.

Although the unnamed family members in *The New Robinson Crusoes* belong to the *intelligentsia* (the father is a geologist and descendant of a wealthy family, the mother's profession is not clearly specified, and the daughter is probably a student), they transcend the characteristics typically associated with this social class.

Furthermore, as in many novels and films addressing the end of the world, we are never told what is really happening and why. However, we are made aware that the main characters do not have the knowledge to cope with survival in the countryside as useless members of the decadent *intelligentsia*. The author points this out with a few Chekhovian details that the reader can pick up and gather: for example, when the mother and daughter need to consult a book called "A complete guide to cultivating orchards and gardens" ("*Spravochnik sadovo-ogrodnogo khozyaistva*") to find out what to do with their fruit garden.

In contrast with the knowledge they lack, an old *babushka* they come across in the village represents the key to survival, not because of her position or career but because she still possesses the ancient knowledge of farming, of how to grow and harvest vegetables:

“The situation was corrected by the same Anisya, she took the baby-goat under her protection, having previously smeared it with mud, and her goat took the baby-goat as its own, and did not kill it.” “Polozhenie popravila vse ta zhe Anis'ja, ona vzjala kozlenka k sebe, predvaritel'no vymazav ego svoej dvorovoj grjaz'ju, i koza prinjala kozlenka kak svoego, ne ubila.”

“We had a *babushka*, a fount of folk wisdom and knowledge.” “U nas byla babushka, kladez' narodnoj mudrosti i znaniij.”

In the opinion of some scholars, tragedy is trivialized in Petrushevskaya's works (Parts, 2005, p. 85). In this particular case, it is clear that the narrator (a teenage girl) does not exaggerate the suffering or even stop to think carefully about the tragic situation; she does not have the time. If we focus on her inner voice we find just a few comments about her feelings, an ironic but tender attitude towards her fellow survivors, and some rays of hope. Surviving becomes much more important than lament in times of collapse.

The fact that the main character does not complain about what is happening is also an example of Petrushevskaya's typical 'absent author' (Parts, 2005, p. 88), that is to say, when any “compassionate authoritative voice seems absent” (Parts, 2005, p. 78).

The daughter mentions that she misses her friends:

“I repeat that we were living isolated from the world and I missed my friends a lot” “Povtorjaju, my zhili daleko ot mira, ja sil'no toskovala po svoim podrugam i druz'jam [...]”

That they have very few resources to eat and labor is hard:

“We guzzled salad from dandelions, cooked soup with nettles and spent all day long plucking grass and carrying, carrying, carrying it in backpacks and bags.” “My zhrali salat iz oduvanchikov, varili shhi iz krapivy, no v osnovnom shhipali travu i nosili, nosili, nosili v rjukzakah i sumkah.”

That her mother once started crying:

“Two tins of preserved fish were the response to her wild behavior, and mother has begun to cry.” “Dve banki rybnyh konservov byli ej otvetom na ee dikoe povedenie, a mama zaplakala.”

But as far as her complaining goes, the text reveals little else. Petrushevskaya uses the Chekhovian stylistic resource whereby the reader is given apparently mundane everyday details, such as how their hands become stronger and more calloused; Tania's yellow boots and coat; and the eyelashes of a dead sucking pig. Therefore, the story does not resort to using tear-inducing narrative devices and is constructed as a puzzle of small pieces that the reader has to put together.

Tragedy also needs to be analyzed in its national context. Expressions of sensitivity vary across different cultural contexts. Russian pragmatism might be difficult to understand for other cultures that express their sensitivity differently.

Moreover, the attitude of the family is peculiar. They seem to think: Well, we are facing a civilizational collapse, maybe we will all die, but we are fighting with all our strength, doing what

we can to help others, these are the circumstances we find ourselves in, so let's do our best to survive!

One of the last sentences in the story: "But we still have a lot of life to live". "No nam do jetogo eshhe zhit' da zhit'", is revealing.

The story ends with this message: let's make the most of everything we have at our disposal. We are survivors (as the Russian people have been on so many occasions, despite the suffering experienced), which makes us proud because we have left a comfortable environment to find ourselves here (the father feels redeemed: "he [the father] did not remember the city, he was happy with his new destiny" "on byl schastliv svoej novoj sud'boj i ne vspominal o gorode") and overcome all the adversities that appear before us.

### ***Locus non amoenus***

In this tale in particular it is possible to find a new concept we have decided to call *locus non amoenus*. As cities are overcrowded and unsustainable places with no food production and no means for self-sufficiency, cinematographic and literary responses to civilizational collapse are similar: we need to go back to nature.

In many works of classical, medieval, and Renaissance literature, idyllic nature was depicted as a place in which to rest, to fall in love, to find everything we need to survive. Centuries and even millennia before cities became the sprawling, crowded, and polluted places we inhabit now, many authors such as Virgil, Dante, Boccaccio, and Shakespeare turned their gaze to nearby nature to find peace and comfort. There were also some exceptions such as Ovid, who in his *Metamorphoses* presents nature as being full of menace and violent encounters.

However, nature has undergone significant changes since Shakespeare's time, and it is no longer so easy to make her give us the resources we need for survival. Due to deforestation, freshwater pollution, biodiversity loss, soil impoverishment, and many other current ecological problems, Mother Nature is no longer the caring mother she used to be. Human life has also changed considerably since Shakespeare's time. We are extremely dependent on fossil fuels, computer science, and urban conveniences. Therefore, the countryside is no longer a *locus amoenus* but a *locus non amoenus* where threats and hard labor are common, and so people start to pay more and more attention to the seasons:

"May days, bitter days" "mesjac maj-mesjac aj"

"We spent a terrible month of June (June days, hunger days) when the food reserves usually run out in villages" "Tem vremenem my prozhili samyj strashnyj mesjac ijun' (mesjac au), kogda pripasy v derevne obychno konchajutsj".

"Everything became more and more terrifying when we started to think about winter." "Vse stanovilos' gorazdo strashnee, kogda my nachinali dumat' o zime."

Besides the threat of being unable to survive in an unknown environment, the family is also threatened by invisible beings. These may represent the powers that be (a likeness of Stalin's

political police, the NKVD), other refugees, or even the unspecified cause of the collapse itself. This is a recurrent feature of the literature of collapse, in which other humans represent an additional threat (*The Road*, *The Children of Men*), if not the principal threat itself (*World War Z*). In Clowes' opinion (1995, p. 147), these threats could be a warning about future persecutions.

Another constant of post collapse literature is the betrayal or absence of institutions. In apocalyptic times there is no army, state, or leader that can save us. For example, when institutions no longer function: "Once my mother went with Anisya to the Social Security office in Prizerskoie, but the office was closed forever and never", "Mama s'ezdila bylo s Anis'ej v sobes v Prizerskoe, no sobes byl uzhe naveki i beznadezhno zakryt,"

But the media continue to misinform: "Everything the radio broadcast was a patent lie" "Po radio peredavalos' vse ochen' lzhive i nevnosimoe,"

## Suffering

In this tale suffering has to do with fear and uncertainty. It also has to do with living in a post carbon society and all its associated disadvantages and inconveniences for the humans we are now. The characters in this tale suffer with thoughts of a highly uncertain future in which they do not know if they will be persecuted, hunted, dispossessed of their few possessions. The narrator is sure that sooner or later they will be discovered:

"If we are not alone, they will come for us. We all know that." "V sluchae, esli my ne odni, k nam pridut. Jeto jasno vsem."

There is also a constant fear of future starvation and a constant struggle for survival. Most of the inhabitants in the village are waiting to die, first Marfutka, who is no longer considered a real person, and who does not even cook or eat anything other than rotten or frozen potatoes:

"*Babka* Anisya, the only inhabitant in the village, because Marfutka doesn't count, and Tania wasn't an inhabitant but a criminal" "Babka Anis'ja, edinstvennyj chelovek v derevne (Marfutka ne v schet, a Tanja byla ne chelovek, a prestupnik)"

Later, the shepherdess, Verka, commits suicide. After her suicide, her mother, a barely delineated figure who appears only briefly in the narration, also seems close to dying of starvation.

Nonetheless, everyone in the village has an apparently matter-of-fact attitude to the imminent possibility of dying, only a few words from our naive narrator make us realize the situation: "Everything becomes complicated when it comes to surviving in times like these!" "Vse stanovitsja slozhnym, kogda rech' idet o vyzhivanii v takie vremena, kakovymi byli nashi."

They show a silent and quiet acceptance of suffering and their response to fear is to stay active and keep on fighting to survive:

"My father began to engage in frantic activity; he began digging an orchard, annexing the adjacent plot of land, for which he removed the fence belonging to some absent neighbors."

“I otec nachal lihoradochnye dejstvija, on kopal ogorod, zahvativ i sosednij uchastok, dlja chego perekopal stolby i perenes izgorod' nesushhestvujushhijh sosedej.”

“And Anisya, with renewed ardor, began to dig her orchard, to cut wood in the forest, to carry branches and trunks to her house. She was trying to save herself from starvation: that was the end that awaited her if she stood idly by” “i Anis'ja s novym rveniem prinjalas' kopat', rubit' v lesu, taskat' such'ja i stvolj k sebe v dom: spasalas' ot perspektivy golodnoj smerti, kotoraja ozhidala by ee v sluchae bezdel'ja,”

However, it is worth noting that even when the situation is distressing and dramatic, the tale is not lacking in humor and parody: the old ladies, wild and drunk, the children, represented as retarded, the difficulties the new Robinsons face in the countryside and their sometimes comical efforts to survive. As many scholars state, this wicked sense of humor and irony is necessary to attenuate the bleakness of Petrushevskaja's vision of communist and postcommunist Russia (Vanchu, 1993, p. 108).

### Surviving

Therefore, as previously mentioned, suffering in this tale is directly related to surviving, which in turn requires following certain rules. The new Robinsons are in the only place to survive and the author reminds us of this with a metaphor concealed within the name of the river they cross to reach the village, because “the name “Mora” comes from the Russian colloquialism “mor”, meaning “wholesale death”. Within this context the garden becomes a haven for survival amidst the larger wasteland.” (Clowes, 1995, p. 153).

The moral of the story is that if we hope to survive in a civilizational collapse there are some ethical-practical rules that we must follow. These rules emerge as a sort of unwritten Decalogue as proposed by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya:

1. You shall trust and help other survivors. Never: everybody against everybody else.  
In this tale, collaboration is the basis for survival. Survivors trade, share knowledge, help each other and, eventually, join forces to survive. Goscilo stated that “Petrushevskaya's dramatis personae refer to multiple instances of cruelty, betrayal, compromise, and disaster offers a bleak picture of the moral indifference and psychological isolation that have pervaded Russian society, especially during the Brezhnev years” (Goscilo, 1989, cited by Vanchu, 1993, p. 108). However, in the case of this tale every moral indifference and psychological or physical isolation leads to destruction. As González (2018) states, “Collapse will provide unprecedented opportunities for the articulation of more fair, supportive and sustainable societies” and “(...) the collective will be essential for surviving”.
2. You shall not turn your back on the weak. In our tale, the weak are the children and the old ladies, but especially the children. The family at the center of the story has nothing and gives everything. They adopt shepherdess Verka's daughter, Lena, and another orphan,

*Found.* As is commonly believed, a civilized society is judged very much by the way it treats its weakest members, namely children, the handicapped, the elderly, etc., as well as its prisoners, as Dostoyevsky said. Even in the small society of the tiny village beyond the River Moria, it functions as an ethical rule that we must follow.

3. You shall not take advantage of the weak. In our tale, survival does not get on well with moral corruption. The main characters do not take advantage of old Marfutka, despite not seeing her as a human being; they maintain their integrity and try to help her. This moral integrity, as we said, is common to every behavior of the family throughout the tale. The idea of interdependence between survivors that they adopt during the tale can also be interpreted as a call for interdependence between all living beings; interdependence that is the basis for the survival of ecosystems and indeed was for ages the basis for our survival as a human race. Furthermore, the family shares its struggles for survival with some non-human companions such as a dog, a cat and some goats, companions that also play a very important role in surviving.
4. Be a team (family as a team). You shall avoid conflicts, selfishness and disputes that destroy everyone as in another of Liudmilla Petrushevskaya's tales of collapse included in this same volume (Petrushevskaya, 2009), "Hygiene". Here, family should be understood in a broad sense, namely those with whom you survive when you need to, regardless of the degree of consanguinity. Hence, family extends to *babushka* Anisya and the two orphan children.

According to Slavnikova, "One of Petrushevskaya's constant themes is the antagonism of generations, not in the classical, Turgenev sense but in almost the biological sense" (2001, p. 62), and this can be seen in the narrated past conflict between parents and grandparents in the city. However, this is not present during the struggle for survival in the village where there is greater intergenerational solidarity.

5. You shall try to gather folk knowledge that young urban people have lost. As we have seen, the *locus non amoenus* has to do with environmental crisis but also with a crisis of values. In modern urban societies we have lost our connection with nature. Most people lack even the most basic knowledge about where their food comes from. We spend most of our time in artificial environments and have no real contact with trees or animals besides through the screen of our mobile phone. We are extremely dependent on fossil fuels. But in a post carbon society we desperately need this folk knowledge to survive. We need to recover this connection to nature because as humans we are ecodependent.
6. You shall never surrender. As in our tale, in times of collapse, if you surrender you are dead. The inhabitants of the *locus non amoenus* are exposed to multiple dangers, and their survival depends on their adaptation skills, their resilience and willpower. They must develop strong self-confidence and be undeterred. In an act of ecomimetics, survivors engage in frantic activity during the spring and summer months, preparing themselves for winter. In fact, the rhythm of the whole tale is frantic; six months fly past in around 4000 words. We can feel this frantic activity in the following examples:  
 "And, with the scared Anisya, my mother came back quickly by foot twenty five kilometers back to Moria. (...)" "i mama bystro peshkom dotopala dvadcat' pjat' kilometrov do Morys napugannoj Anis'ej (...)"

“In the afternoon, we took the goat home and keep going with the hard summer tasks: haymaking, weeding the garden, earthing up the potatoes, and all at the same rate with Anisya...” “Vecheru my prinesli kozlenka domoj, i poshli surovye letnie budni: senokos, propolka ogoroda, okuchivanie kartofelja, i vse v odnom ritme s Anis'ej...”

7. You shall seek your own redemption in times of collapse. In contemporary societies there seems to be no happiness beyond modern urban environments; it is difficult to believe that redemption or even happiness can be found anywhere else. However, our main characters are capable of finding themselves in times of crisis, especially the father. Collapse offers them a certain freedom of choice and provides the opportunity to deploy all their potential and develop new capabilities.
8. You shall plan ahead. The only way to escape the collapse is through prevention, but unfortunately this concept is absent in our societies: the latest economic crises were unexpected, the current environmental crisis is denied by some, while many others simply prefer to ignore the consequences of how depleting natural resources are currently exploited. However, the father and the mother in this tale behave differently, prepare themselves in the city for the coming collapse, and keep using foresight during the time in the village, because this is what surviving in a natural environment demands. As the narrator explains at the very beginning of the tale: “Mom and dad were determined to take the lead” “Moi papa s mamoj reshili byt' samymi hitrymi.”
9. You shall be capable of renouncing material goods. Clinging to material possessions leads to destruction; this is a very clear message in post collapse literature. As when in a house on fire, in times of collapse you shall not gather up any possessions but just run for your life. This is very difficult to do in mass consumption societies where our possessions define not only our status but even our own identity. In this tale we have a very clear example in the contrast between parents and grandparents. The narrator states that her grandparents are dead because they remained in the city clinging onto their apartment, a constant in communist and postcommunist literature where apartments are scarce and large flats a luxury. “Then everything was torn asunder amid rows about my mother and my grandparent’s flat, that could go to hell with its high ceilings worthy of a general, servants, and private kitchen. We never actually lived in it, and now, probably, my grandparents were already dead.” “a dal'she vse utonulo v skandalah iz-za moej mamy i dedovskoj ih kvartiry, provalis' ona propadom, s general'skimi potolkami, sortirom i kuhnej. Nam v nej ne privelos' zhit', a teper', naverno, moi babushka i dedushka byli uzhe trupami.”
10. You shall not trust authorities. In post collapse literature and films, old or even brand new authorities are never trustworthy. In this tale there are a few signs of this, as usual nothing too explicit, but solid enough to reach such a conclusion. In our tale authorities will not help our family because every office is already closed, and will even try to misinform over the airwaves. Moreover, we cannot be sure if authorities are not those Others who persecute the family in the village.  
In times of collapse there will be a major reconfiguration of the State resulting in a reduction of its capacity for action (González, 2018), and such a scenario could give rise to new social organizations such as small libertarian communities. However, the development of eco-fascism is also a possibility, as stated by Gordon (2013) among many

other authors. Furthermore, it seems very important to keep watch over governments and the powers to be.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *The New Robinson Crusoes* is to some extent an atypical example of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's literary output. It takes place outside the boundaries of a city with its small crowded apartments, and far from the intimacy of a dysfunctional family. Although this does not make the story any less distressing, this new scenario does offer a glimpse of hope related to the capacity of human beings to overcome difficulties and work together for survival. It belongs to the dystopian trend in postmodernist Russian writing.

The narrative style of the author is cold, lacking in details, with a practically Impressionist structure that allows the reader to reflect on and interpret events in her own way. Likewise, the open ending and the limited information provided perform the same function of suggesting without showing and allow the reader to speculate. A naive narrator who interprets reality in her own way, without drama, filters the terrible events.

The story, originally published in 1989, now acquires even greater relevance in the current context of environmental and social crisis. It has much in common with other works of collapse literature: escape to the country and repeasantization, the failure or even the betrayal of institutions, the Other as a potential enemy or competitor, a lack of knowledge for recovering the lost connection with Nature. We are reminded that in times of collapse, cities will be uninhabitable, but that nature is no longer the welcoming space it once was.

The *locus non amoenus* is presented as an inevitable context, an environment in which we will have to fight for our survival. Suffering is therefore related to uncertainty, to fear of hardship, to the prospect of almost certain future starvation, and finally to the lack of means and knowledge required to fight for the survival of a civilization (the same one as ours) that preserves life in many artificial ways. In cities, our dependence on fossil fuels is absolute, and Lewis Mumford's megatechnics and megamachines (Mumford, 1971) acquire a new relevance.

Also, the *locus non amoenus* is a testing ground where members of the *intelligentsia* can prove themselves and find redemption, but only on the condition of renouncing the vanity of earthly possessions.

In spite of the suffering, hardship and fear, the author gives us a set of ethical guidelines to survive in a hostile environment, in a post apocalyptic landscape which is one of the fears of twenty-first century humanity. Post carbon societies are the new Godzilla, the new zombie attack, the new nuclear apocalypse, in the contemporary compendium of fears. These guidelines can be summarized in an unwritten list that the author allows us to deduce from the successful steps the survivors are taking and also from their manifest mistakes.

In this paper they have been presented in the form of a Decalogue that contrasts with other tales by the same author and serves as a guide to understand how humanity should evolve if it intends to face the challenges posed by the twenty-first century.

Beneath the form of an adventure lies a profound ethical lesson, albeit perhaps unintentional, because although the author frequently adopts a critical perspective in her work, the same cannot be said of her tendency to offer an ethical message beyond moral satire.

It also reminds us that individuals of societies of abundance are not more supportive because of their enjoyment of material goods; on the contrary, in this story there is a very clear contrast. On one hand we have the wealthy grandparents with their opulent apartment who are unwilling to share it with their son and who have failed to survive the collapse, while on the other hand our poor family and their associates live in their tiny hut yet manage to survive.

In fact, the basis of survival is collaboration and solidarity; something that should be remembered in our extremely individualistic societies characterized by mass consumption and obsession with economic growth.

We should pay careful attention to this Decalogue if we aim to preserve any form of society in the future. Points 1 to 3 state that we should move towards more collaborative societies, where social protection of the weak should take precedence. More highly evolved and supportive societies should be the basis for our future survival: societies that are at peace with the planet; societies where mass consumption of goods will not be the core of mainstream ideology; societies of prosperous degrowth, as Sergue Latouche states (2009); and societies that nurture different values such as friendship and knowledge sharing, biomimetics, interdependence, and ecocodependence (Riechmann, 2005), recognizing our real needs (Max Neef, 1994) as the Decalogue states in points 4, 5, 6, 8 and 9.

Point 5 states that intergenerational cooperation is indispensable. In modern western urban societies, little or no attention is paid to the knowledge, participation and contribution of elderly people. Also, we are losing sight of rural wisdom and the importance of living in harmony with nature. Because our system is fragile, we need to recover this knowledge for more resilient future societies.

Finally, as point 10 states, if we cannot trust authorities, we should build more participatory power structures and combat authoritarian and violent governments, and eventually evolve into self-governing small societies, as proposed by Gordon (2013) among other authors.

Note: All passages from *The New Robinson Crusoes* that appear here were translated directly from the original Russian by the author of this paper.

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**Vol. 11, Issue 2  
October, 2018**

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**Reflections on the Democratic Potential of Ecopedagogy in a Neoliberal Age**

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**Abstract**

In a fiscally conservative, neoliberal academic climate, mainstream education in the US has tended to marginalize the ecological humanities. Despite an increasing body of work produced in ecocritical studies, I argue that a viable ecopedagogy must take into account the structural and ethical impingements of neoliberal academic policies. To begin to overcome the neoliberal conditions within the academy, this essay draws upon Rancièreian aesthetic and pedagogical theories to explore how the ecological humanities, with a particular focus on ecopoetry and ecocriticism, can contribute to the formation of a political consciousness and to embodied knowledge.

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## The “Science Communication Problem” as a Problem of Sociality

We live in an age in which only forty percent of Americans believe that our use of fossil fuels has contributed to climate change, and a third believe that humans have existed in our present form since the beginning of time (Achenbach, 2015, p. 41-44). While scientific illiteracy in the country is not a new phenomenon, the consequences are increasingly profound and far-reaching—indeed, global. According to Dan Kahan of Yale University, a larger demographic of the public is capable of grasping scientific theories, but there is a strong tendency among many to use scientific knowledge selectively to support their own entrenched beliefs (Achenbach, 2015, p.44). This particular dilemma has been called the “science communication problem” among scientists who have found that communication and our own tribal nature—our tendency to be influenced by the beliefs and behaviors of those with whom we associate—are at the root of the issue (Achenbach, 2015, p.44). In our current age, an age in which nature is now compromised by human interventions and the future of the planet is at risk, the most pressing task for environmentally conscious educators is not just to impart scientific knowledge, but to discover new modes through which we may communicate persuasively with those outside of our tribe. Kahan’s study teaches us that the question of sustainability is as much of a social problem as it is an epistemological problem. While exploring current manifestations of scientific illiteracy are beyond the scope of this paper, I posit that the implications of Achenbach’s (2015) and Kahan’s (2015) studies are useful to the extent that they suggest that ecology, a field of biology concerned with the relationship between organisms and their environment, can be productively expanded when it is conversant with a social and cultural critique. If the “science communication problem” is rooted in issues of sociality, the ecological humanities, an interdisciplinary field of research that draws from philosophy, ecology, and literature, among other fields, includes a critique of those social and political powers that contribute to the rise of neoliberal ideologies and the devastation of the earth.

As we are confronted with multiple ecological crises: pollution, the rise of endangered animals, climate change, and deforestation, to name just a few, the need for an earth-based pedagogy becomes ever more critical. As David Orr (1992) posits, knowledge about nature has declined significantly in the last few decades, and an education relevant to issues of sustainability requires first a radical re-alignment of values, as well as a re-structuring and re-imagining of higher education. Orr calls for sweeping change: the integration and promotion of ecological thinking across disciplines so that ecology comprises an ethos or principle of education, rather than just a field unto its own.

However, according to Orr (1992), in a neoliberal era when university administrations have become increasingly conservative, experimentation in curricula is viewed as both risky and costly (p.133-4). In addition to the cuts in education and social care, neoliberalism has put in jeopardy the living conditions of human and non-human animals as the one percent of the population seeks to gain control of the earth’s natural resources. Neoliberalism is marked by its principles of deregulation, commodification, and privatization, as well as its privileging of market needs over social policies. It has infected mainstream education in the US, which often sidesteps or undermines forms of ecological knowledge. Indeed, the ecological humanities often exist in the margins of education, yet to underestimate their contribution to socio-political life, especially

following the 2016 elections and Trump's roll-back of environmental protections advanced under the Obama presidency, would be a mistake.

In cutting across disciplinary lines and promoting diverse approaches to scholarship, the ecological humanities are well-suited to confront the science communication problem through aesthetic and cultural resources. There are advantages to teaching and studying both the sciences and the humanities in tandem. Just as the environment can provide the means for enlarging the scope of the humanities beyond the human, so too can the humanities contribute to the understanding of the environmental crisis and move students to action. As a writing and literature instructor, I will focus on the role of the literary arts as especially powerful resources for ecological studies and I will offer my own lessons and interventions in an ecopoetic and ecocritical context.

I explore in the following essay how the study of ecocriticism and ecopoetry can help us become better readers and interpreters of the natural world and prepare us to take political and environmental action. Ecocriticism may offer a reading of ecopoetry, which seeks to undermine the category of the natural and disrupts a pastoral ideal of "Nature" as pure and unmediated by our own interventions. *Ecolanguage Reader* (2010), a text that helps to frame the major stakes of the ecopoetic movement, proposes that ecopoetry that embodies ecological processes can interact with the social world and mobilize change, disrupting cultural trends that have contributed to the devastation of the environment. Marcella Durand posits that ecopoetics is not merely occupied with patterns of representation, but with agency; for her, ecopoetry is a dynamic medium that conducts an exchange of energy with the material world: "... it has the ability to interact with events, objects, matter, reality, in a way that animates and alters its own medium—that is language...[It is] concerned with the links between words and sentences, stanzas, paragraphs, and how these systems link with energy and matter..." (2010, p.123). The notion that ecopoetics enables an intervention in matter and in language, as well as the field's preoccupation with the formal properties of language, is shared by Evelyn Reilly, who writes "that ecopoetics must be a matter of finding formal strategies that effect a larger paradigm shift and that actually participate in the task of abolishing the aesthetic use of nature as mirror for human narcissism" (2010, p.261).

Ecocriticism, as both an academic field and movement with an activist ethos, is a term inaugurated by William Rueckert in his foundational essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1996), which entails "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (p.107). Ecocriticism seeks to connect knowledge with action and to contribute to projects of ecological restoration. It has been invested in recuperating an ethics primed to respond to intersectional power dynamics and linked oppressions. As an interdisciplinary field, it transverse the fields of gender studies, queer theory, race studies, philosophy, and politics to interrogate practices of representation and domains of power. Indeed, the field's transdisciplinarity is critical in facilitating access to intersectional approaches towards social and ecological issues. For example, an ecofeminist might explore the intersections between female oppression and the exploitation of an objectified and feminized nature or an eco-critic might examine the interaction between speciesism and the modern coding of the sexual, gendered, or racialized "other" in animality. As Orr (1992) reminds us, to see the interrelations between oppressions is "politically threatening" and thus powerful for the ecological movement (p.88).

To ignore the complex interplay between nature and culture, as well as technology and ecology, invites reductive—even dangerous—thinking, overlooking the role humans have played in causing the environmental crisis. Ecopoetry responds to the ecological crisis and reminds us that everything in the biosphere is interconnected, sometimes in very complex ways. This notion of deep interconnection is the ecologist Barry Commoner’s First Law of Ecology. Our position of dependency is often dramatized in ecopoetry, which can be persuasive in advancing an ethic of accountability to the earth and its beings.

I argue that the study of ecopoetry in particular is well-suited to promote meaningful dialogue among those of different tribes (the crux of the “science communication problem,” according to Achenbach), to enhance participation in environment, and to nurture a culture of sustainability. I propose that such a model of education would involve applying a Rancièrian learning framework (1991) that engages students in what Alex Means (2011) refers to as the “activist art of citizenship” (p.29-30). More specifically, a Rancièrian model might involve approaching the ecological crisis through critical inquiry and creative collaboration, in which students and teachers become co-teachers and learners, and together participate in a pedagogy of emancipation.

My argument develops as follows: I first turn to Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic-political theory, in which he argues that aesthetic events enable a disruption of the status quo and, through their acts of dissension, open a space for democratic possibility. I then explore the emancipatory logic of Rancièrian pedagogical theory, which enables me to carve open a space for an ecopedagogy that can begin to overcome the impasse of neoliberal administrations in education. For Rancière, emancipatory encounters in the educational and larger public sphere are based on democratic struggle rather than the passive attainment of legally inscribed rights. Exploring the implications of his aesthetic philosophy and pedagogical model, I discuss their relevance in the study of ecopoetry. To this end, I offer a survey of my own ecopedagogical interventions that invite dialogue about the intersection of social, cultural and ecological issues. I also offer a writing assignment that seeks to re-awake sensory and bodily experience through active engagement with the non-human world and—in turn—heightens the imagination, a critical resource for environmental activism in the classroom and community. Finally, I argue that Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic-political theory helps to recover the democratic viability of art and challenge the neoliberal logic of the dominant culture.

### **Rancière’s Society of Artists**

Rancière (2006) posits that art recalls us to physicalized, psychic, and sensory material out of which the imagination makes and transforms meaning. In reconfiguring modes of perception, art can be a powerful resource for creating consciousness and exposing how we make meaning as individuals and as communities. In its sensuous presentation of aesthetic material, art exposes the conditions for apperception, referencing how the body translates sensory data into meaning. It reveals the structure of feeling, disclosing how the body relates to its own faculties.

While art is instrumental in inducing an embodied consciousness, its vulnerability to ideological co-option has been discussed in debates about whether it is an autonomous field separate from political concerns or whether it may be compromised under the burden of political ideology.

Rehearsing those debates is beyond the scope of this paper, but for Rancière, art is not only a resource for politics, but there is a politics that inheres in aesthetics. Aesthetics is political to the extent that it defines what is common to the community, revealing and ultimately reconfiguring society's distribution of systems of organization and visibility (so Rancière's theory goes). While art resists a teleological orientation and may not successfully be imputed with a political task, there is a political dimension to aesthetics; this conjunction occurs via the material realities of the body (Rancière, 2006).

Rancière (2006) argues that art introduces democratic potential to the social order and radicalizes the individual. He posits that politics and aesthetics overlap in the sense that they share the capacity to define what constitutes the common and who participates in community, articulating who can speak for and within the community. Art intervenes in the normative modes of production and performativity in the empirical world and introduces alternative forms of visibility and perception in society that normally is governed by the "police," or the formal, regulatory systems that inform sensory and affective experience (Rancière, 2006, p. 82). For him, an aesthetic event questions the police distribution of roles and normative modes of being. This event marks a creative, democratic process via its interruption of the dominant culture. In this sense, democracy is conceived as adversarial, emerging where there is a conflict between police orders and those who formerly had been rendered invisible or voiceless by such orders.

In this way, democracy is not an a priori construction native to constitutional law, just as citizenship cannot be conceived solely as a right granted by the legal arm of the state. Art offers alternatives to hegemonic discourses that seek to impose social order and is thus democratic by virtue of its intervention in the status quo. Being without an imperializing schematic, art disrupts regulatory apparatuses that in life segregate beings from one another and revises the distribution of sensible experience. In regard to art's liberatory politics, Rancière (1991) writes the following:

We can thus dream of a society of the emancipated that would be a society of artists. Such a society would repudiate the division between those who know, and those who don't. It would only know minds in action: people who do, who speak about what they are doing, and who thus transform all their works into ways of demonstrating the humanity that is in them as in everyone (p.71).

Rancière's dream of a society of artists is egalitarian, based on the idea that democracy exists where people are active makers: able to speak of and practice their art. As he argues, art interrupts social and economic inequities that exist in life, yet the society of artists that he imagines is a potentiality, a dream. This immanent potential in art for ideological rupture hinges on a notion of art as initiating the individual's political subjectivation.

### **The Poetics of Citizenship**

In his essay, "Jacques Rancière, Education and the Art of Citizenship" (2011), Alex Means posits that Rancière's aesthetic-political theory and understanding of intellectual emancipation opens a space for re-thinking citizenship as "a kind of activist 'art' or 'poetics' of political becoming... outside of political liberalism and the law" (p.29-30). Reading Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1991) alongside *The Politics of*

*Aesthetics* (2006), Means argues that the French philosopher offers a model of intellectual emancipation that has its analogue in the artistic process. In recognizing the close relationship between art and education, Means provides a paradigm for thinking through aesthetically and politically meaningful “art of pedagogy” that radicalizes both teacher and student. Even while Rancière eschews the mainstream discourse of citizenship as a state-endowed right, opting instead for a poetics of political self-actualization, Means (2011) helps us to read and recover an aesthetics of “citizenship” in Rancière’s pedagogical model.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière retells the story of Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), a French schoolteacher who was an instructor to Flemish students, although he and his students did not share a common language. Jacotot developed an approach to education that he termed “universal teaching,” which emerged from his discovery that they could learn to speak and write French despite their teacher’s limitations. This case study is significant for Rancière insofar as it demonstrated that the act of explanation was not indispensable to the learning process. According to him, explanation, while occasionally used in teaching, leads to “stultification,” which keeps students in a state of inequality, beholden as they are on a teacher to transmit knowledge and thus unable to achieve full emancipation (Rancière, 1991, p.13). Emancipation occurs when there is active attention and a recognition of equal intelligences between teacher and students, leading to a consciousness “of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself” (Rancière, 1991, p. 39). Ultimately Rancière rejects the hierarchical distribution of roles between teacher and student in which the teacher is understood as one who has mastered a field of knowledge and seeks to impart that knowledge to the student in incremental stages. The logic of emancipation does not entail asserting a position of mastery; it does not involve the teacher’s explication of how the student is oppressed by systemic inequities, which undermines student agency in the liberation process (Biesta, 2017).

Insofar as Rancière argues that all bodies are equal, and that our equality is an a priori condition that exists in our capacity for thinking, speaking, and doing, he also understands learning processes as developmental and transformative acts, situating education within an immanent field. In contrast to educational policies in the US that reinforce conformity and standardization, such as the “No Child Left Behind” Act, an ideal education in citizenship, according to Means (2011), “...would require intellectual emancipation to become a structuring principle. This would demand that knowledge production and learning be rooted in a notion of equality in common: the creative collaboration of teachers and students outside the specter of mastery” (p.43). In an educational setting, the democratic principle about which both Rancière and Means write, would take the form of a process of artistic production, collaboration, and confrontation between students and teacher (Means 2011). Out of these dynamics, a pedagogy of citizenship emerges through the subject-making process of dissensus.

To fully realize Rancière’s model of education as a political and poetic act, one must first take into account the linguistic nature of teaching itself. Given that language necessarily involves a slippage in meaning, and because language can never arrive at the truth without some omission, thought is expressed in “verification” for Rancière, which is subject to processes of translation and

interrogation (Rancière, 1991, p.68-9). Rancière posits that students and teachers possess equal intelligences and that the learning process is not realized through the explication of knowledge, but rather upon the *inventive* communication and *creative* translation of knowledge. Both are poetic acts: “in the act of speaking, man doesn’t transmit his knowledge he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan: a person who handles words like tools” (Rancière, 1991, p.65). For Means, such a conception of the speaking subject as artist enables a rethinking of education as aesthetically and politically charged (2011).

While Rancière’s pedagogy may seem akin to a constructivist epistemological position, Gert Biesta’s “Don’t Be Fooled by Ignorant Schoolmasters” (2017) helps us to read Rancière’s model of teaching as one that has been widely misread through a constructivist lens. Biesta (2017) instead posits that Rancière’s primary argument is one that emphasizes the process of educational emancipation “and not a general theory of education or schooling or the dynamics of instruction (didactics)... (p.63). Biesta (2017) reads Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) as a “critique of the idea that emancipation relies upon some deeper insight about our true human existence,” which needs to be transmitted from a master explicator to a pupil (p.63). Against what he views as a misreading of Rancière as a constructivist who dispenses with the teacherly role of instructor, Biesta (2017) maintains the indispensable—though non-dogmatic— position of the teacher in a Rancièrean emancipatory education. While there is no universal truth for the instructor to transmit, according to Rancière, the French philosopher terms the interactive process between teacher and student “verification” in its literal meaning: the sense of making true so as to discover “what follows from it” (Biesta, 2017, p.64).

Rancière’s (1991) logic of emancipation is congruent with his aesthetic-political theory. Specifically, Means (2011) argues that Rancière’s political artist-subject stands in opposition to the institutional powers that legally inscribe rights and protections through a hierarchical system that is informally premised upon the enforcement of unequal divisions of power (Means, 2011, p. 40). Extrapolating from Jacotot’s discovery of “universal learning,” Rancière articulates a model of education that reduces structural inequity from the learning process. Educational emancipation occurs as one realizes one’s own capacities as a thinking subject. As Rancière writes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), “...each ignorant person could become for another ignorant person the master who would reveal to him his intellectual power” (p.17). Rancière’s subjects are “persons,” not yet proffered citizenship status. Significantly, he interprets political subjectivation as an act or event; citizenship is not a pre-ordained identity handed down by the state.

Means’ thesis on citizenship education helps to crystallize Rancière’s analysis of intellectual emancipation. Means (2011) posits that citizenship—although operating within a “police logic” in Rancière’s formulation of normative juridical and legal regimes—might be re-imagined through the exertions of the artist-subject who undergoes a political becoming through the act of creating an activist art (Means, 2011, p.41). This activism is in contrast to a neoliberal model of citizenship, in which the citizen is a politically passive subject who does not re-define normative regimes (Means, 2011, p.38). Instead, for Means (2011), a Rancièreian model of education would prepare students for meaningful forms of political engagement:

Pedagogy for the art of citizenship would take seriously the challenge of a radical notion of human equality and democratic possibility...[It] would demand recognizing the autonomy of teachers while at the same time working to create the conditions that would enable students to develop their intellectual and artistic potentiality in common so that they may refuse the position assigned to them—to make themselves of some account –by speaking, writing, and acting together in ways that disrupt and transform unequal and unjust relations in public life. (p.45)

Means' understanding of education as an art helps to situate the common tasks of speaking, writing, and making in the classroom within a political context and to elevate them to the status of art. The pedagogy of citizenship may be understood as a mutually informing, subject-making act for teacher and student. Knowledge, in this case, "is not the way of emancipation," but rather emancipation occurs "under the assumption of equality" (Biesta, 2017, p.66). Teaching for liberation does not involve demystifying the student through explication but it instead it inscribes one in "the political project of equality" (Biesta, 2017, p.66), as does the aesthetic act.

I would suggest that a Rancièrian ecopedagogical model, as I have articulated it with the aid of Biesta's and Means' readings of Rancière's aesthetic and pedagogical theories, would seek to forge alliances among the arts, humanities, and environmental sciences so as to prepare students to face the challenges of an increasingly compromised environment and to think creatively about how culture can contribute to the sciences. A Rancièrian approach would be radically liberatory and premised on the idea that teacher and student may be conceived as equal agents of learning. It would involve shifting scholarly authority from the teacher to the student through the dialogic activities of confrontation and collaboration.

### **An Introduction to an Ecopedagogical Interventions**

Rancière's aesthetic and pedagogical work offers an enabling space for intervention in college-level education, since its most powerful lesson is that art enables us to change conditions from within. According to Richard Kahn (2010), in a neoliberal culture, environmental education has been "coopted by state forces and morphed into a... method for achieving higher scores on standardized tests...it has come to stand in actuality for a real illiteracy about the nature of ecological catastrophe, its causes and possible solutions" (p.9). Rancière's pedagogical and aesthetic works are valuable in that his model of emancipatory education is not compromised because of student illiteracy or the anti-social nature of the "science communication problem," as described above.

Under neoliberal conditions, a Rancièrian pedagogy is valuable for its emphasis on emancipatory education as a process premised on "universal learning," the assumption of equal intellectual capacities between teacher and student. The question that follows is: what might sustainable learning and practices based in a Rancièrian model look like? Against the machinations of a neoliberal climate whereby capitalism, industry and power are touted as social goods at the expense of the poor and local communities, the work of Rancière is particularly apt in the current academic and political climate by tying learning to social action and political intervention. Most

importantly, his work teaches us that instructors and students are all socio-political subjects and that we are all implicated in the making of democracy.

In my formulation, a pedagogy concerned with ecological issues must first begin with a commitment to an earth-based—rather than solely human-based—system of values. It must be committed to the preservation and stewardship of all life forms, and not just the human. As such, meaningful ecological education requires the awareness that business as usual is not going to make a profound impact on the current crisis. As Orr (1992) writes, “Real ecological literacy is radicalizing in that it forces us to reckon with the roots of our ailments, not just with their symptoms” (p. 88). Reformist efforts are not sufficiently far-reaching, while behavioral and attitudinal changes, according to Orr, are needed. He calls for an eco-literacy that would entail the capacity to think broadly and to observe nature with insight, to re-think citizenship as a planetary phenomenon for all life forms, to learn and observe in one’s own life an ecological commitment, and to apply critical and social theory to ecological thinking (pp. 87-88).

To learn to inhabit a biocentric or non-anthropocentric consciousness is a cornerstone of ecopoetic thought. As I posit, it requires a realignment of values: the suppression of the human ego, a capacity to imagine a polis that includes nonhuman animals, and a mode of being founded on cooperation with nature. The task of ecopoets has been to find strategies to develop ecological approaches to poetry, and to understand how human culture and history interface with environment. Moreover, they have sought to explore how language and form might intervene within an increasingly threatened environment and how it might help us to develop a praxis beneficial to our planet and to one another. Pressurized by a collapsing environment, ecopoetics since the 1990s has become increasingly radicalized and has sought to explore the relationship between aesthetic experimentation and environment.

I offer my following lesson in an effort to illustrate concretely how one might approach these ideas. In this lesson, the instructor may work in concert with students to learn to read, write, make, and speak in a more life-sustaining language. Christopher Manes’ essay “Nature and Silence” (1996) can be assigned to students to frame the ways in which the ecological crisis is a crisis of language and culture. He contends that while tribal cultures view all life forms as articulate and intelligible, Western culture generally perceives nature as silent, as if the capacity to speak is solely a human characteristic (p. 15). Humanism has muted nature, according to Manes, a tradition that perpetuates human exceptionalism and reinforces an ontological boundary between ourselves and the other organisms of the planet. Manes (1996) proposes that we learn a new language shaped by ecological knowledge of place and biotic communities, rather than our traditional “rhetoric of humanism” (p. 25). Understanding such a language and employing it “means metaphorically relearning the ‘language of birds’—the passions, pains, and cryptic intents of other biological communities that surround us and silently interpenetrate our existence” (Manes, 1996, p.25). Learning the “language of birds” can involve studying the behavior and communication of non-human animals. For Manes, such a language may find its analogue in such wilderness thinkers as Henry David Thoreau and Gary Snyder (Manes, 1996, p.25).

On the level of praxis, learning the language of the earth’s biota requires immersion in an ecosystem. Following Rancière, I posit that it also involves the assumption of equal intelligences

between teacher and student and—I would add by extrapolation—the pervasive communicative intelligence among animals. Thus, a pedagogy of the ecosystem takes for granted that learning activities should happen both inside and outside of the boundaries of the classroom and may be shaped by the environment. Outdoor meditation, the observation and care of animal life (such as through a wildlife rehabilitation center), walking, journaling and sketching are activities that can be used to facilitate understanding of the ecosystem as not only our necessary life support, but our groundwork for intellectual, emotional, and imaginative development. All such activities involve close attention: listening to and observing nature directly. Creating environmentally aware students must begin with direct sensory interaction with the ecosystem and discussions that prompt understanding of the senses as instrumental resources for political change. Such discussions can be informed by a Rancièrian pedagogy that emphasizes immanence over transcendence, the values of positionality and reflexivity over universality and standardization. Democratic potential is realized in the process of disturbing one's relationship to automated patterns of seeing, hearing, feeling and doing. In other words, the political meaning of Rancièrian pedagogy would seem to begin at the level of the senses, much like art itself. The writings of Rancière open a space for considering how ecopoetics can be critical resources for embodied knowledge and democratic intervention, and—in turn—our own survival. The earth discloses its ill-health; bearing witness to it and capturing it through creative expression can enable students to have a meaningful experience of the self as implicated in the web of life. Sensory activities that take place within the natural world can help students and instructors to tune in to language of the biosphere: what human and non-human animals, plant life, and other organisms are telling them about the state of the earth.

After journaling on their own on or outside of the campus, undergraduate students in my class are required to write their own ecopoems. They are also tasked with composing a reflective writer's statement. In the latter they are asked to explain how they see their poem fitting within an ecopoetic tradition and to articulate their vision for the poem. Some points that they must address are the following:

1. What are you trying to communicate through this poem? What is the ecological message of the poem? How does culture interface with nature in it?
2. How are you using poetic devices in the poem (ie: rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, consonance, assonance)?
3. How does your use of visual elements in the poem (layout on the page, capitalization, grammar) contribute to the meaning of the work?
4. How has the language of the environment informed your poem? How have nonhuman animals, organic and non-organic matter, and the ecosystem influenced your aesthetics?
5. What images in the poem are the most vivid? Are there any particularly evocative metaphors or similes? What other devices, such as personification and irony, are used in the poem?

As instructor, I also complete the prompt and share my poem with my students, just as they share theirs with the rest of the class. Together students and instructor, in being accountable for

articulating a sense of place through speaking, acting, and making, all of which are poetic acts in Rancière's formulation, are being asked to consider how the non-human world speaks. This language of ecology, as I hope to demonstrate to my students, is not confined to the human, but rather extends to animal rhetoric, the nonlinguistic embodied communication of non-human organisms, and ecosystems, which communicate through ecological indicators the state of their health. In translating such information together, instructors and students are "develop[ing] their intellectual and artistic potentiality in common" and engaging a poetics, following the pedagogies of Means and Rancière (Means, 2011, p.45; Rancière, 1991).

Understanding the full import of attending to a non-human language may be facilitated by placing such assignments in conversation with Aaron Moe's (2014) theorization of animal poesis. Moe refers to the process by which animals participate in an activity of poetic making as "zoopoetics," a gestural repertoire or animal rhetoric shared among nonhuman and human animals. For him, zoopoetics is a necessary subfield of ecopoetry that occurs when an inter-species interaction inaugurates a breakthrough in a poet's form and style (Moe 2014, p.54). The aesthetic and political implications are significant: if animals are active makers, agents of poesis, they are also collaborators in the production of culture. Moe seeks to carve open a space for a non-anthropocentric poetics of the animal, positing that gestural communication resides both in animal behavior and in the "general origins of poetry," following Aristotle (7). Moe extends Aristotle's conception of the "impulse to imitate" to the animal kingdom, which "contributed to the evolution of... animal rhetoric" and in turn the "evolution of poetry and poetics in the Euro-American tradition" (7). The aesthetic and political implications are significant: if animals are active makers, agents of poesis, they are also collaborators in the production of culture. Education may thus take on the language of vitalism we learn from organic life and in turn provide us with a powerful new mode for articulating political possibility. I ask students to reflect on some of the following questions as we wrap up the learning sequence: what might be the implications if this "we" includes the non-human realm and all organisms are understood as speaking beings contributing to an ecological language? How might ecopoetics help to re-write both politics and education?

The teaching of ecopoetics provides a point of departure from the dominant culture and even the culture of humanities education that traditionally separates the domains of nature and culture. I see one of my primary tasks as an educator is to deconstruct a humanist philosophy that has reduced the interactions between the environment and the human to dualistic constructions: nature v. culture, human v. nature, human v. animal, science v. the humanities, and society v. nature. Since climate change is a cultural byproduct of human intervention, it becomes necessary to interrogate the paradigm of "nature" and "culture" as diametrically opposed forces. Such false binaries contribute to the misconception that cultures do not already exist in nature (human animal and animal cultures exist across the planet), that the human is not natural, that the human is not animal, and that nature is not in fact social. These fallacies have ecological repercussions that have fragmented our reality, diminished our stake in ecological stewardship, and impoverished our own critical resources. In my class, I ask students to define and then subsequently deconstruct their definitions of nature and culture using examples from their own lives and their readings.

A pedagogy based in the appreciation and teaching of ecopoetics is powerful in all of the ways that it can facilitate creative empowerment, reconfigure normative modes of perception, and delegitimize neoliberal modes of living. In Rancièrian terms, in re-organizing the distribution of sensory experience and introducing new forms of visibility and perception in society, ecopoetics can help us to respond to and participate responsibly in the biosphere.

In Rancièrè's (2006) formulation, equality is possible only when individuals are capable of understanding one another (p.52). Ecological knowledge requires a suspension of a humanist phenomenology that sees in nature only what can be used to advance human interests and instead understands the relative equality of all organisms. Education relevant to a sustainable society requires an uncompromising biocentric consciousness, a capacity to detect and promote the well-being of those rendered invisible by what Rancièrè refers to "police" orders.

In evaluating this learning sequence, I turn to the work of Gert Biesta (2009), who seeks to move past the language of teaching efficacy and instead engage questions of value and purpose in considerations of educational outcomes. According to Biesta (2009), students need "to explore their own ways of thinking, doing, and being...[while teachers] always need to ask" what is meant by effective education and for whom is it effective, keeping in mind that equal opportunity is not a given (p.3). He wishes to restore the relational language of education to the academy where "learnification" (his term) takes place (p.3). Taking issue with the individualistic emphasis inherent in the language of learning that permeates the academy, Biesta (2009) argues that the discourse of student-centered learning often eclipses meaningful conversations about and considerations of what education is good for and for whom, the ways in which students become socialized into social, political, and cultural orders through education, and the process by which students become subjects, individuals not reducible to their socialization into these aforementioned orders. Rancièrè's pedagogical philosophy (1991) enables me to consider the value- and purpose-laden questions of how students are engaging in processes of "verification"—a creative process of translating and interrogating knowledge—and "universal learning" (p.68-9). I measure each in multiple ways: through students' reflective statements, their ecopoetics, and the ways in which they challenge the explication of knowledge through the democratizing process of dissensus in their writing and class discussions, following Rancièrè's aesthetic-political philosophy (2006).

### **Neoliberal Threats to a Meaningful Ecopedagogy**

It has become commonplace for mainstream education in the US to neglect the local and ecological, accenting human experience and anthropocentric norms at the expense of other living systems (Graham, 2007, p. 376). Local culture and ecology are often diminished or overlooked in traditional curriculums. As Mark Graham writes, "...a sense of caring for place are lost, and alternative cultural attitudes toward nature that are more ecologically responsive are marginalized" (p.377). In addition to the material threats facing our population as a result of our current condition, the combination of factors that have led to habitat loss and the extinction crises have led multiple thinkers—from pedagogical theorists to eco-critics—to argue that our generation's inner worlds, our imaginations and intellects, have been compromised as a result (Moe, 2014, p. 59; Orr, 1991, p. 86).

The impact of industrialization, the global spread of neoliberalism, overpopulation, and resource exploitation in the Western world, as well as the decline in ecoliteracy and place-based knowledge, have all contributed to our current crisis. We live in a world with finite resources and increasing resource depletion, yet capitalism is premised on continuous growth. Dominating all aspects of human life, neoliberalism has had corrosive effects on civil liberties and created conditions that put the most vulnerable, the poor and marginalized, at peril. Its values of hyperindividualism, competition, and privatization have led to the exploitation of peoples, local communities, and resources. For example, it is responsible for transforming family farms into factory farms and slaughterhouses (Kahn, 2010, p.3).

Citing corporate globalization, the rise of technocapital, the expansion of capitalism, and the inequities in educational opportunities and sustainable vocations, as well as other cultural and political threats that have risen under neoliberalism, Richard Kahn (2010) posits that environmental programs have been subsumed by Western science and undermined by the neoliberal academy. He argues for an ecologically grounded pedagogy that distances itself from mainstream environmental movements that continue to be complicit with neoliberal policies. One symptom of this phenomenon is the appropriation of indigenous people's traditional ecological knowledge in science courses and the characterization of "the ecological Indian" as an absolute counterpoint to the limitations of Western ecological knowledge (Kahn, 2010, 106).

In the classroom, neoliberalism's repercussions are manifold: the increasing privatization of education has resulted in massive layoffs, the reduction of state funding for public universities, the withdrawal of learning resources and services for students, and an investment in private industries at the expense of local communities and its interests. Neoliberal trends have contributed to the corporatization of the university system, normalizing the commercialization of education and diminishing its status to a "product" and its students to human capital. The increasing standardization of pedagogy at the secondary and post-secondary levels as well as an enhanced reliance on testing to measure student achievement have also not helped the cause (Graham, 2007, p. 375). In such a climate, students are often advised to invest in profitable career paths and prepare themselves for a competitive workforce (Graham, 2007, p. 375).

Under neoliberal policies, fields that tap into issues of social and environmental justice—namely, the liberal arts—are increasingly compelled to defend their "relevance" to administrations with agendas informed by market demands. Clayton Crockett (2012) observes, "Colleges and universities... gut the humanities and liberal arts because they do not attract money... and they do not obviously train students to make money... We effectively teach students to understand, assimilate and apply structures that have failed and are in a state of collapse" (p.166). Clayton (2012) notes that the elites that influence university and college systems continue to prevail because they know how to thrive in a capitalist system, while the rest of the population must learn to think and act outside of systems that pervade academic and non-academic cultures (Clayton, 2012, p.166).

In a similar vein, for David Orr (1991), academic culture in the US is responsible for undervaluing environmental education, and he notes that in a fiscally conservative academic culture and an era in which departmental budgets are being dramatically reduced, the field is often viewed as

expendable (p. 83). Given the current crisis, he suggests that schools, colleges, and universities have not gone far enough in educating competent ecological stewards. As he argues, the curriculum and values of education in the US have not helped the cause and it is problematic to continue to rely on conservative pedagogical models (Orr p.83).

While I agree with Kahn's, Crockett's, and Orr's critique, there are reasons for optimism. Ecocritics Michael Branch and Scott Slovic (2003) point to the ever-growing body of scholarly and pedagogical essays and journals as signs of health in the field of ecocriticism. They cite subfields that have expanded the reach of ecocritical studies, such as urban studies, field studies, green film studies, literary activism, and bioregionalism, among others. Graduate students are producing theses and dissertations in the field at a growing rate, while undergraduate courses with an environmental focus are sometimes taught outdoors, giving students the opportunity to learn through experience, rather than abstract knowledge alone (Branch et. al 2003).

Moreover, despite the dire climate in US education and politics, Rancière teaches us that art can disrupt the status quo, altering conditions from within. Even as the arts are relegated to the margins of neoliberal curriculums, by virtue of their autonomy from ideological constructs, they are non-complicit with the market logic of the dominant culture and may restrain the increasing standardization of curriculums in the neoliberal academy. As Rancière argues, art is neither autonomous from politics nor is democratic equality a fixed condition handed down by a state power. Rancière's aesthetic and pedagogical theories teach us that politics does not delimit an outside or an above that imposes its will on those below, but rather it is realized in the democratic processes of struggle and confrontation. As Means (2011) posits, the disruptive nature of art in the polis to challenge the status quo is comparable to a pedagogy that recognizes the equality of intelligences and agency of teacher and student.

Above I have discussed how ecopoetics can be a radicalizing activity, a means of articulating membership in a not-solely-human community. In my lessons that require tuning into the language of animals and the ecosystem, students are priming themselves for emancipation that extends beyond just the human. An ecologically centered liberation is at the heart of my own pedagogy. In merging aesthetics and ecology, I wish to enable students to explore how the ecological crisis is a crisis of human knowledge, communication, and sociality, and how ecological aesthetics that are derived from the concrete world and the imagination can help us to develop a more sustainable relationship to the creatures and world around us. These goals are supported by Kahan's (2015) and Achenbach's (2015) findings. As I have discussed above, the science communication problem is at its essence less a problem of intelligence or knowledge than it is a social problem. Individuals tend to agree with the beliefs of their tribe, despite being confronted by contrary evidence for their beliefs (Kahan, 2015; Achenbach, 2015). This suggests that the ecological humanities has an important role to play in science education. They also have a critical role in challenging the capitalist and technocapitalist principles of the neoliberal state, which are at odds with an ethic of living more simply and sharing the earth with other creatures.

Moreover, as I have outlined by way of Rancière, education may be conceptualized as an art with a democratic dimension. Significantly, ecopoetics provides an alternative to the logic of neoliberalism and can teach us about new ways of making, doing, and speaking. Ecopoetics is

situated not just in ecological, but social and political realms, as I have hoped to show by way of contextualizing and extrapolating from Rancière aesthetic-political thesis. According to him (2006), art's interruption of the distribution of the sensible makes new forms of perception and communication possible, so that this interruption is a precondition for making relation possible. Art conveys the import of sense and opts for forms of knowledge that are embodied rather than merely rational. What kind of world might we enter if systems of production followed the ethos of artistic creation and enhanced the social world, rather than being structured by profit?

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