Auguries of Elegy:
The Art and Ethics of Ecological Grieving

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Cultural Studies
in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen’s University Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Queen’s University is situated on traditional Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Territory

September 2015

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ABSTRACT

Elegy is an appropriate mode for expressing the complex feelings that may accompany an awareness of the state of human-caused climate change and the concomitant ailing health of the biosphere. In order to understand these contemporary concerns, I look back to the early part of the twentieth century, when the cataclysms of global wars and their destructive effects on human and other-than-human life inspired the first generation of modern ‘resistant’ elegists. Like modernist anti-war elegies, the contemporary ecological (visual) elegies – by artists such as Brandon Ballengée, Edward Burtynsky, Gwen Curry, Chris Jordan, Deborah Samuel, Kade Twist, and me – that I examine engage in deliberate, ethical mourning and melancholia to both express and demand affective engagement with ecological issues in an ultimately hopeful attempt to create a better future. It is my hope that such works inspire viewers to think critically about their own potential to engage in what Clifton Spargo would call “wishful interventions” with regard to climate crisis. The second part of the dissertation text is an ‘analytical archive’ of the ecological artworks that form the main component of my Ph.D. work, including Augury : Elegy, Indicator, National Elegy, 1,000 Flyers, and Vernal Pool.
GRATITUDE

My sincere thanks to all of the artists and copyright holders who kindly granted me permission to include images of their artworks in this text. Many thanks to the faculty and students in the Cultural Studies program at Queen’s University for their support and guidance, especially my supervisor, Gary Kibbins, and committee: Lynda Jessup, Clarke Mackey, Patricia Rae, and Ted Rettig. I am particularly grateful to artists Karen Abel and Gareth Bate for their collaboration, hard work, and expert photographic skills. To my family (especially Janice L. Barr, Emma Barr and Brett Kane, Jim Barr and Keiko Hayahara, and Ken and Ethel-Anne Brill) and friends: your love and support (not to mention hours of work assisting with art projects) made this possible – I am grateful beyond words. And to my loving partner Matt Brill: my gratitude and love for you are boundless; in so many ways, I couldn’t have done it without you.

This is for Sylvan Quinn.
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Isn’t this lingering with something painful, disgusting, grief-striking, exactly what we need right now, ecologically speaking?

- Timothy Morton¹

There’s no way to win any justice without generating tremendous amounts of discomfort, for ourselves first of all.

- Gabriel Winant²

In an article entitled “What the warming world needs now is art, sweet art,” 350.org founder Bill McKibben writes that “if the scientists are right, we’re living through the biggest thing that’s happened since human civilization emerged. One species, ours, has by itself in the course of a couple of generations managed to powerfully raise the temperature of an entire planet, to knock its most basic systems out of kilter.”³ But, he writes, this life-threatening catastrophe has not led to the kind of urgent, global-scale corrective and preventative action one might hope for. McKibben acknowledges that part of the reason for this is the scale and scope of the problem. It is so big that a single person, community, or nation cannot solve it. It also affects the world in disproportionate ways, meaning that, generally speaking, the richest individuals, communities, and nations tend to be the least affected by climatic and ecological changes. Scientists are able to measure the effects of climate change in various ways, but, McKibben asks, “can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?” This is where “art, sweet art” steps in: “We are all actors in this drama, more of us at every moment. […] It may well be that because no one stands outside the scene, no one has the distance to make art from it. But we’ve got to try. Art, like religion, is one of the ways we digest what is happening to us, make the

sense out of it that proceeds to action.”

Wendy Lynne Lee similarly argues that “justice-driven emancipatory action” which “foster[s] respect for biodiversity and ecological stability” can have its roots in both ecological and aesthetic realms, resulting in what she terms “a critical feminist political praxis capable of appreciating not only the value of human life, but those relationships upon which human and nonhuman life depend.”

As an artist and researcher, I take these calls seriously. While direct-action activism and personal lifestyle changes are necessary components of sustainable change (and while I am also engaged in that work), ethico-aesthetic-affective interventions are also required, in and out of galleries and institutions, created collaboratively with/in communities and also by individuals – and it is individuals such as myself (affluent [or relatively so], educated first-worlders) who are in a position to undertake such work. My project is a transdisciplinary contribution to what Suzi Gablik calls “art’s necessary engagement with the world,” an “eco-ventionist” effort at “interven[ing] to heal environmental problems” by situating “community at the core of our species nature” and foregrounding “empathic attunement.”

My primary aesthetic method for achieving this empathic attunement, and the tone of the bulk of my work, is that of elegy and what Patricia Rae calls “resistant mourning.” But first: why do mourning and elegy compel me? I suppose it may have started as early as age four, when my mother noticed me repeatedly painting entire sheets of paper black. While I am generally a cheery – albeit highly sensitive – person, I do have a melancholy streak, which has deepened the more I have learned about the ecological crisis that (colonial, industrialized)

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4 *Ibid.* See my note below about the use of “we,” “us,” etc. in this text.


7 Rae 2007, 22.
humanity has wrought upon, and continues to wreak upon the planet. My interest in elegy was also piqued when I took Rae’s “Modernist Elegy” course in the first year of my Ph.D. In the introduction to her book Modernism and Mourning, Rae defends the ongoing relevance of politicized “resistant” anti-war elegies from between the world wars, pointing to the importance of mourning as an ethical protest against unjust losses, and stating that these works reveal the damage that can be done by not confronting and dwelling with loss and grief. Rae’s passion for the subject, and her conviction about the importance of elegy as a cultural form (and a potentially generative form of aesthetic intervention), coupled with my longstanding affinity for modernist art and literature, naturally led to its inclusion in my project. The more I thought (and felt) about ecological crisis, the more my thoughts turned to grief and mourning, and at the same time I was producing the works that led up to the piece entitled Augury: Elegy (2011), which eventually became the central artwork of my project.

We are in the midst of a significant cultural moment for ecological mourning. In the pages that follow, I will elaborate this conceptual framework, as well as examining thematically-related works by other artists. This text is meant to situate and contextualize my creative praxis and exhibitions, which form the primary component of my dissertation work. The text is divided into two main sections. The first is a discussion of elegy, starting with modernist written and visual “resistant” and “proleptic” anti-war elegies, and discussing parallels with contemporary artworks that engage with ecological mourning. The second section is an ‘analytical archive’ of the elegiac artworks that have formed the core of my dissertation project, arranged roughly chronologically. The end of this section looks at my recent collaborative, participatory project.

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8 Rae, 22-23.
Vernal Pool (with artist and naturalist Karen Abel) and a participatory work in progress entitled 1,000 Flyers, as well as briefly discussing the works of other eco-artists whom I believe to be creating the kinds of artworks that make tangible what Joanna Macy has termed “active hope.”

Macy explains that active hope is not equivalent to simple optimism or hollow hopefulness; rather, it begins with an honest acknowledgement of the reality of the ecological situation (which, by most standards, is quite grim), and then asks what a better future would look like. Having a picture of the future that we would prefer enables us to “take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction. Since Active Hope doesn’t require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide” (Macy and Johnstone, Active Hope [2012], 3).
N.B.

“"We”: At certain points in this text I use (or quote texts that use) the terms “we,” “us,” and “our.” I realize that this may be problematic, especially when the content involves issues of justice and sustainability; for example Don McKay writes that “All of us, as citizens of the planet, are called to amend our lives, to live less exploitatively and consumptively....” While McKay’s intention is positive, the implied equality between all people on Earth is extremely inaccurate. In this text, “we” and “us” should be generally taken to refer to populations such as the one this text was created in the midst of – affluent, literate, educated, predominantly white people living in the heavily industrialized, consumerist global north with disproportionately large carbon footprints. It is “we” who are responsible for the damage done by the Anthropocene, and it is “we” who need to work most rigorously and selflessly to remediate and transform our relationship with and impact on the biosphere.

Images: I have provided images of as many of the artworks discussed as possible. All images in the text are used with express permission of the copyright holder and are copyright the artists unless otherwise mentioned. I was unable to obtain permissions for certain images – for those I have provided Internet links so that readers may view the images online.

PART I:  

_Auguries of Elegy: The Art and Ethics of Ecological Grieving_

Chapter 1: Introduction

An elegiac mode is appropriate, given the loss of species, of habitats, of old forms of life – ‘old’ here standing in for anything that happened earlier than last week. […] Environmental language, however, speaks elegies for an incomplete process, elegies about events that have not yet (fully) happened. […] They fuse elegy and prophecy, becoming elegies for the future. - Timothy Morton

In the trailer for artist Chris Jordan’s film _Midway_ (2013), viewers are invited “Come […] on a journey through the eye of beauty, across an ocean of grief… and beyond” as he documents the trash-filled bellies of baby Laysan albatrosses, dead after being fed “our plastic trash” (from the Pacific “Gyre”) by their unwitting parents. Jordan further states that as “[b]oth elegy and warning, the film explores the interconnectedness of species, with the albatross on Midway Island as a mirror of our humanity.” Jordan is one of many contemporary ecologically-engaged artists whose elegiac work explores an ethics of ecological melancholic grieving as an affective, pedagogical, and even activist strategy. As an artist-researcher, my work too engages with ecological elegy and what Patricia Rae calls “resistant mourning” or “activist melancholia,” revisiting the ethics of mourning that began with modernist writers and visual artists. As Timothy Morton states, elegy is an appropriate mode for expressing the complex feelings that may accompany an awareness of the state of human-caused climate change and the

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12 Rae 2007, 19.
ailing health of the biosphere. In order to understand these contemporary concerns, I look back to the early part of the twentieth century, when the cataclysms of global wars and their destructive effects on human and other-than-human life inspired the first generation of modern ‘resistant’ elegists. Like modernist anti-war elegies, the contemporary ecological (visual) elegies that I will examine engage in deliberate, ethical mourning and melancholia in an ultimately hopeful attempt to create a better future.
Chapter 2: Elegies

In *Modernism and Mourning*, Patricia Rae points to the relationship between the overwhelming disasters of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (AIDS, genocides, terrorism, wars) and a corresponding explosion of “public and academic interest in how we mourn and in the question of whether there is social progress to be gained from experiences of loss.”13 In her view, this ongoing attention to mourning is grounds for renewed attention to the fraught, mournful literary works from the World Wars.14 Rae defends the continuing relevance of these politicized “resistant” anti-war elegies, stating that they leave mourning unresolved without endorsing evasion or repression; indeed, they portray the failure to confront or know exactly what has been lost as damaging. They encourage remembering where memory has been repressed, and they expose the social determinants for troublesome amnesia. At the same time, they resist the narratives and tropes that would bring grief through to catharsis, thus provoking questions about what caused the loss, or about the work that must be done before it is rightly overcome. They raise questions about the social forces that have prevented the work of mourning from being accomplished, and they offer alternatives to the consolatory strategies that have been widely deployed and that threaten to introduce a whole new round of loss and grieving.15

Rae suggests that, in its concern about preventing future losses, this type of resistant mourning “encourages work for positive social change.”16

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid, 22-23.
16 Ibid, 23. In *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (2008), Jonathan Flatley traces this resistant melancholic modern impulse back further: “The publication of Charles Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* in 1857 represents a turning point in the history of the relationship between melancholia and aesthetics. With Baudelaire, we see the emergence of a decidedly antitherapeutic melancholic poetry. Its aim is not to make you ‘feel better’ or to redeem damaged experiences but to redirect your attention to those very experiences. One leaves Baudelaire’s poetry not relieved of grief but aggrieved, clearer about what the losses at the origin of one’s grief might be and what or whom may be to blame for them. At the same time, however, as in ‘À Une Passante’ [To a Passerby], we are shown how one’s losses might be a secret source of connection, interest, and even pleasure. Baudelaire’s could be called a splenetic modernism, for it is his task to transform ennui, that ‘monstre delicat’ that renders the world incapable of sustaining emotional involvement, into spleen: a state in which one is exceedingly aware of, angry
Prior to the World Wars, elegies (Western European and British in particular) were premised on resolving mourning and finding consolation and comfort in nature’s cycles, in the flourishing of the nation-state, and in visions of eternal life in heaven. As such, elegies (written, musical, and visual) aided in what Freud termed “the work of mourning.” In his seminal “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud examines the “normal,” compensatory, resolvable “work of mourning” (grieving and eventually ‘getting over’ the death of a loved one by “working” to break the attachment of the mourner to the deceased and replace it with a new libidinal attachment to someone or something else) versus “pathological” melancholia (endless, irresolvable, depressive mourning that “behaves like an open wound” and refuses to sever from the lost object).17 Traditional elegy, visually expressed in artworks such as Nicolas Poussin’s Et in Arcadia Ego18 (c. 1650) aided in the process of “healthy” mourning, providing griever with libidinal substitutes in nature, nation, religion, and so on.

But as the cataclysm of WWI and then the incomprehensible horrors of the Spanish Civil War and WWII unfolded, many writers, activists, and artists began to realize that, when confronted with the traumatizing, unjust, and uncountable losses of the wars, the idea of resolvable and consolatory mourning was not only impossible, it was unethical. Artistic and literary responses to these conflicts, especially retrospectively, could only be anti-elegiac, or truly ‘modern’ elegies of perpetual, ‘ethical’ mourning. The comfort provided by conventional mourning and its artistic representations could lull people into passive forgetfulness, which could result in history repeating itself. Thus an insistence on remembering, on dwelling in the pain of

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17 Freud, 1957, 253.
18 The work can be viewed at [http://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/poussin/2a/18arcadi.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/poussin/2a/18arcadi.html) (accessed July 25, 2015).
unjust loss, was deemed necessary by politically-engaged artists as a sort of ethical insurance that such losses would never be allowed to happen again.

Modern elegies are difficult and complicated. “Anything simpler or easier,” Jahan Ramazani notes, “would betray the moral doubts, metaphysical skepticisms, and emotional tangles that beset the modern experience of mourning and of self-conscious efforts to render it.”

A psychoanalytic model of compensatory, resolvable mourning is “inadequate for understanding the twentieth-century elegy” as well as being inadequate for comprehending or commemorating the horrors of the twentieth century’s wars, mass deaths, myriad other atrocious injustices, and ecological catastrophe. Faced with the impossibility of traditional mourning and elegizing, artists like Virginia Woolf believed that “art must be stripped of compensatory literary tropes in order to soberly confront the horror and politics of manufactured death.”

Traditional elegies, both literary and visual, would not do. As a way of understanding post-First World War elegies, Ramazani proposes “the psychology of melancholia or melancholic mourning,” arguing that these works tend “not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss.” As such, the elegy is reborn out of the ashes of modernity, but in a darker form: it is “anti-elegiac (in generic terms) and melancholic (in psychological terms)” in order to, as Margot Heinemann puts it in her Spanish Civil War elegy, “Grieve in a New Way for New Losses.” Contrary to traditional hopes for a comforting ‘eternal life’ through commemorative elegy, modern elegists force an ongoing confrontation with death.

As Patricia Rae points out in an analysis of Stephen Spender’s 1937 poetic self-elegy “War Photograph” (“I have an appointment with a bullet...”), the poem’s “speaker imagines a future

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19 Ramazani, 1994, x.
20 Ibid, xi.
21 Clewell 2004, 214.
22 Ramazani 1994, xi.
23 Ibid.
photograph that will preserve in a ‘continual present’ the material reality of his death. The documentary evidence thus preserved will make a lie of any effort to seek comfort in pastoral elegy’s cycle of renewal.”

It is death, not life, that is eternal in both the literary and visual modern elegy.

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Image 1: Robert Capa, *Death of a Loyalist Militiaman, Córdoba front, Spain* (early September 1936), © International Center of Photography / Magnum Photos


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24 Rae 2010, 315.
Whereas modern poets use the traditional elegiac form as a basis for their experiments in radical poetic grieving, modern pictorial elegists find, in some cases, radically new structures and imagery for their fraught visual elegies. Sandra M. Gilbert describes elegy as “a genre disfigured by a traumatized modernity,” and pictorial responses to the World Wars and the Spanish Civil War are an especially apt representation of this disfigured poetics. Kerr Eby’s etching *St. Mihiel, September 13, 1918: The Great Black Cloud* (1918), as well as Percy Smith’s *Death Awed* (c. 1918-19 – a disturbing depiction of the grim reaper on the battlefield, shocked by the sight of a pair of boots standing upright with their owner’s splintered shin bones emerging from them) are, according to Elizabeth Helsinger, frozen-in-time visual analogues to the WWI anti-elegies of poets such as Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen. The etchings, explains Helsinger, “exploit the impersonality of the visual image – its inability to utter the first person ‘I’ – to stress the obliteration of the individual in time of war.” Helsinger states that modern visual elegy “continually confronts us with the moment of overwhelming grief, the particular event of death that gestures to the enormity of mass destruction. When elegy begins to refuse the ‘normal’ work of mourning (the movement toward consolation), its pictorial forms acquire new power.” These pictorial elegies, in melancholically illustrating memory, act as a sort of “instrument of war” (to quote Picasso), firing powerful visual warning shots to make “war against war” (to quote the slogan on a *1923 print by Käthe Kollwitz*): to warn, to keep the

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26 See, for example, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series (c. 1949-1985), and Anselm Kiefer’s massive mournful German landscapes (1970s-80s).
27 Gilbert 2006, 368.
28 The work can be viewed at [http://www.meaningsofservice1914.qmul.ac.uk/frontline/death-awed](http://www.meaningsofservice1914.qmul.ac.uk/frontline/death-awed) (accessed July 25, 2015).
29 Helsinger 2010, 675.
30 Ibid., 676.
31 Pablo Picasso, qtd. in Martin 2002, i.
32 The Survivors (“War Against War”) (1923) can be viewed at [www.kollwitz.de/imageInformation.aspx?id=z1923w1&sprache=d](http://www.kollwitz.de/imageInformation.aspx?id=z1923w1&sprache=d) (accessed July 29, 2015).
wound open, not maliciously, but as an ethical salvo against complacency and forgetting. There is a particular potency in the visual image, one that Helsinger refers to as its “immediacy,” which, she claims, can attune us to “forms of feeling” ranging from subtle to extreme. She goes on to explain that while pictorial elegy “invokes and alludes to the poetic elegy,” its nonverbal form enables it to “[reach] into the silence before speech. A scream waiting to happen, a poem not yet written.” This tragic, silent scream is the melancholic cry of modern elegy. The turn to abstraction and nonobjective visual elegiac forms (exemplified in works such as Picasso’s *Guernica* and Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series) recognizes that the mourned other who initially appeared lost – the uncountable and untraceable war dead, the Spanish Republic, and more recently, forests, jungles, bodies of water, entire species – becomes a lacunal absence to be perpetually mourned, but not graphically represented. No image of these others’ once-living forms could efface the brutality of their destruction, nor should it. To focus on the representation or preservation of the lost object would be both delusional and unethical; the responsibility of the living, as Woolf and her colleagues realized, is to refuse to be lulled into a complacency that could allow the injustice and atrocities of past wars to be repeated in the future.

In performing what Tammy Clewell calls an “anticonsolatory practice of mourning” whose “commemorative forms [are] intended to provoke and hurt, rather than console and heal,” resistant elegies “[compel] us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept responsibility for the difficult task of remembering the catastrophic losses of the twentieth century” (these catastrophes include the undeniable and ongoing reality that our biosphere is suffering as a result of human intervention – something that Peter Homans would likely call a “symbolic loss” at an

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33 Helsinger 2010, 680.
34 Clewell 2004, 199.
epic scale\textsuperscript{35}). I believe that these aesthetic protests against forgetful complacency are part of an ethics of mourning that has a strong resonance and ongoing relevance in our fraught contemporary world. Politically- and ethically-engaged melancholic-elegiac visual works are fitting responses to the tragedies of the twentieth century. They refuse to let the pain be numbed by time; they refuse to obfuscate or forget. Rather, they dare us to attend deeply and actively to their dark subject matter. Would that humanity had heeded their voiceless cries.

Melancholia may be confused with depression, despair, or self-pity, and as such may be critiqued for creating paralysis rather than action, but I agree with Morton and Rae, who suggest that resistant elegy’s melancholic tone can spur an ethical impulse to act. Morton stresses the importance of “a politicized melancholy”\textsuperscript{36} and, as I mentioned above, Rae advocates “activist melancholia”\textsuperscript{37} whose manifestation in resistant mourning practices (including artworks) “may be the basis for progressive political reform.”\textsuperscript{38} This purposeful melancholia echoes Judith Butler’s “tarrying with grief, […] remaining exposed to its unbearability,” and provides an answer to her questions about what we might gain from maintaining an ongoing relationship with grieving: “are we […] returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?”\textsuperscript{39} There is indeed a great deal to be gained from a commitment to grieving, in particular when the losses are unjust and put at risk our collective future. I would add that, in my view, “one another” includes other-than-human beings (as well as entities such as water, air, mountains) as integral participants/recipients of this collective responsibility.

\textsuperscript{35} Homans coined the term “symbolic loss” to refer “to the loss of an attachment to a political ideology or religious creed, or to some aspect or fragment of one, and to the inner work of coming to terms with this kind of loss. In this sense it resembles mourning. However, in the case of symbolic loss the object that is lost is, ordinarily, sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective” (2000, 20). This concept of symbolic loss seems to be another way of describing a non-personal melancholic mourning.

\textsuperscript{36} Morton 2010, 255.

\textsuperscript{37} Rae 2007, 19.

\textsuperscript{38} Rae, “Introduction” (2007), 20. Rae “prefer[s] the term ‘resistant mourning’ to melancholia in talking about the progressive response to death modernist literature often demonstrates” (22-23).

\textsuperscript{39} Butler 2004, 30.
confrontation with another’s death (in the case of Robert Motherwell’s *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series the death not of a person but a state, and by extension the death of justice and democracy; in the case of ecological elegy, the past and potential deaths of parts or all of the biosphere) reminds us of our own mortality, whose “acknowledgement names the condition for our ethical orientation in the world, the very condition, as Derrida puts it, of ‘hospitality, love or friendship.’” Derrida has written passionately about the ethical value in rejecting ‘normal’ Freudian mourning and instead embracing the endless grieving that, in his view, comes with a full comprehension of the reality of the loss of a loved one. So, to reiterate, melancholic grieving, especially when it is principled and grounded in a commitment to justice, can be politically and ethically fruitful.

*Image not available; please see [http://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3047](http://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3047)*


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40 Clewell 2004, 207.
Like Derrida and Butler, Clifton Spargo sees an ethical dimension in mourning, and particularly in inconsolable or melancholic mourning. When anti-elegiac artists or other mourners\(^{42}\) refuse consolation or a redemptive vision, this dwelling on the death of the other may imply a responsibility to act – a “wishful intervention”\(^{43}\) as Spargo calls it – for that other. Rae explains that this kind of ethical mourning “involves an acute and stubborn retroactive sense of responsibility for the loss.”\(^{44}\) According to Rae, contemporary AIDS activists such as Douglas Crimp and Michael Moon “have characterized any imperative to complete the ‘work of mourning’ for victims of AIDS as a call to endorse the *status quo:* an imperative to work for the restoration of ‘normalcy,’ in more ways than one. They have championed chronic melancholia on the grounds that it keeps things unsettled; it prevents a preventable catastrophe from becoming assimilated into the order of things.”\(^{45}\) Indeed, Spargo states that “an opposition to death […] may function as the predicate of justice.”\(^{46}\) As I mentioned above, this opposition, this purposeful melancholic mourning, should not be confused with despair, which is an absence of hope that usually results in “a debilitation of the will.”\(^{47}\) The ecological grieving I am describing is driven by a realist melancholy, by a deep emotional bond with the ecological world, by a desire for its healing, and by a will to act on its behalf – it is driven, perhaps invisibly but in fact, by hope.

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\(^{42}\) Hamlet, for example. Rae also mentions the “militant sadness” of Argentinian and Serbian mothers (2007, 18). Artist Marina Abramovic’s video installation and performance piece, *Balkan Baroque* (1997), is another compelling and disturbing example of melancholic mourning (through artwork), in this case for the war in Bosnia, but by extension, according to the artist, for “any war, anywhere in the world” (www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988, accessed July 29, 2015). In the piece, Abramovic sat atop a pile of 1,500 bloody cow bones, scrubbing each one clean. The pile of cleaned bones was then left in the gallery in front of a wall where a three-channel video dealing with Abramovic’s experience of the Bosnian war and her Yugoslavian heritage played.

\(^{43}\) Spargo 2004, 25.

\(^{44}\) Rae 2007, 18.

\(^{45}\) Ibid. I would like to acknowledge here the rich and compelling critical work around queer melancholia and mourning, as well as queer ecologies (for example, by Katie Hogan and Catriona Sandilands) and to express my regret at not having the time or space to include it in this text.

\(^{46}\) Spargo 2004, 20.

In a recent article in, of all places, the “Sustainable Business” section of The Guardian,
Jo Confino echoes these arguments, suggesting that “grieving could offer a pathway out of a
destructive economic system.”  

“We need to grieve,” he states, “for the destruction we have
wrought so that we have a chance to heal ourselves. […] The point of recalling the rape, pillage
and desecration of communities as well as the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity is not
to get stuck in anger and hopelessness, but to transcend them through the power of compassion
and forgiveness.”

He describes a “moving grief ceremony” he recently attended, at which
Indigenous representatives from communities in Africa, Australia, and North and Latin America
collaborated to “creat[e] a narrative of how to transition to a new economy based on social and
ecological justice.”

Confino quotes Patricia McCabe (Dineh Nation, New Mexico and
Arizona), who told him that “expressing grief can lead to a new beginning.” McCabe further
stated that

Humanity has developed a very deep ability to push devastating information
about the impacts of our actions into our subconscious and this is a danger. We
are numbing ourselves to this life going out. Expressing grief has always been a
cathartic experience and a rebalancing mechanism, and I believe it is a part of
building the foundation for any new story we might want to tell. […] Many
indigenous peoples have a pact with mother Earth that said we would hold on to
the principles of thriving life, and that one day the world would turn back and
come to us again. To be ready for that, we must also go through our grief in order
to truly be able to come back into alignment of our mind, body and spirit.

To be clear, the melancholic focus on death and grieving I have described in my various
examples above is not meant to be morbidly paralyzing; rather, as McCabe insists, it is meant to
energize, rebalance, and galvanize us – the survivors, those with the ability to act based, perhaps,

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid. Social and ecological justice are deeply connected, a point that other authors, including Vandana Shiva
(whom I cite below), have made.
51 Ibid. This honouring of grief echoes Joanna Macy’s focus on “honoring our pain for the world” as part of the
ecological-activist healing system she teaches called “The Work that Reconnects” (http://www.joannamacy.net/the-wtr-spiral.html).
on a “stubborn […] sense of responsibility.” In a sense, it is actually hopeful, propelled by the vision of a future in which these wrongs have been righted. In its drive toward social and ecological justice, the deliberate and ethically-motivated melancholia I am advocating thus has the potential to move us toward collectivity and action. This ethical imperative links modernist responses to the horrors of war to contemporary political and aesthetic forms of engagement with social injustice and looming environmental catastrophe (not yet a foregone conclusion, but an augury).

Ecological elegies warn against the kind of absences we will be mourning in the future should present losses be allowed to continue. Here we may return to Morton’s ecological “elegies for an incomplete process, elegies about events that have not yet (fully) happened. […] They fuse elegy and prophecy, becoming elegies for the future. […] Traditionally, elegies weep for that which has already passed. Ecological elegy weeps for that which will have passed given a continuation of the current state of affairs.” This ecological grieving (sometimes a present grieving, sometimes a future-perfect, anticipatory grieving) is not confined to literature and theory. After observing the emotional and psychological impact of the changes wrought by a mining project in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia, Glenn Albrecht coined the term “solastalgia” to name “an emplaced or existential melancholia experienced with the negative transformation (desolation) of a loved home environment.” And Ashlee Cunsolo Willox’s research with Inuit who are experiencing profound ecological loss found that many people, in addition to experiencing solastalgia over climate change-related losses of traditional

52 Rae 2007, 18.
53 See Joanna Macy’s description of “active hope” (in a footnote above).
lands and ways of living, “reported experiencing a sense of anticipatory grieving for losses expected to come, but not yet arrived.” Patricia Rae uses the term “proleptic elegy” to refer to elegies that were produced by artists between the world wars, when a sense of the looming possibility of another conflagration drove poets and other artists to create works of anticipatory grieving. She suggests that as a version of “ethical mourning” (such as Spargo discusses) “[p]roleptic elegy could justly be added to the arsenal of resistant modes of mourning compiled in recent years by activists looking for social hope in devastating loss.” Proleptic ecological mourning is at the heart of many responses to current ecological conditions and predictions. It can also be a mode of ethico-aesthetic praxis by artists engaged in ecological issues. While some of the artworks I will discuss engage in mourning for past losses (works dealing with extinct species, for example), others, including my installation Augury: Elegy, are proleptic ecological elegies, grieving and warning about the kinds of future losses that could occur given a continuation of the status quo. These works are often visually arresting, even disturbing. In an era of neoliberal navel-gazing, consumer culture, information over-saturation, and media numbness, this often seems like the only way to effectively communicate the urgency of the situation. Indeed, Morton suggests that “progressive ecological elegy must mobilise some kind

57 Cunsolo Willox, “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning,” 140.
58 “Prolepsis” essentially means “anticipation.” It can also refer to “the representation of a thing as existing before it actually does or did so” – e.g. “he was a dead man when he entered” (Oxford American Dictionary 2013). See Rae’s article “Double Sorrow: Proleptic Elegy and the End of Arcadianism in 1930s Britain,” Modernism and Mourning. Ed. Patricia Rae (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 213-234.
59 Rae 2007, 229.
60 The Dark Mountain Project is an example. Its creators, Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, write: “The Dark Mountain Project is a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than denying it. The Project grew out of a feeling that contemporary art and literature were failing to respond honestly or adequately to the scale of our entwined ecological, economic and social crises. We believe that writing and art have a crucial role to play in coming to terms with this reality, and in questioning its foundations” (http://dark-mountain.net/about/faqs/). In an interesting link to the proleptic elegies I am discussing, the Project’s title was taken from the last line of Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Rearmament” (1935): “Jeffers saw the coming war as inevitable, tragic and world-changing. He believed it would be a disaster, but he also knew he could do nothing to stop it. His reflections on that world-changing time elided with our reflections on ours.”
of choke or shudder in the reader that causes the environmental loss to stick in her throat, undigested. Environmental elegy must hang out in melancholia and refuse to work through mourning to the (illusory) other side.\textsuperscript{61}

Melancholy has its roots in the cardinal humors of the body, from Greek \textit{melas-}, ‘black,’ and \textit{kholé}, ‘bile.’ In “The Dark Ecology of Elegy,” Morton reminds us that in humoral theory, melancholy was the humor that “brought humans closest to the earth.”\textsuperscript{62} He sees this ancient and earthy intimacy with melancholy as a potential foundation for “an ecological fidelity to objects, a political project that may be self-destructive – valuably so – precisely because it is a moment in the unfolding of what Alain Badiou calls a truth process, a rigorous and relentless distinction of the subject from its identifications.”\textsuperscript{63} Morton argues that melancholy is thus “an irreducible element of subjectivity, a primordial relationship to objects rather than one emotion among others.”\textsuperscript{64} In his defence of melancholia entitled \textit{Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism}, Jonathan Flatley cites Robert Burton’s \textit{Anatomy of Melancholy}, arguing that “melancholizing” can be an active, creative, and productive process. Like Albrecht’s solastalgia, “melancholizing is something one does: longing for lost loves, brooding over absent objects and changed environments, reflecting on unmet desires, and lingering on events from the past”; Flatley further states that melancholizing “might, in fact, produce its own kind of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{65} He explains that for writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry James, and Andrei Platonov, melancholizing leads them to an understanding that their individual and intimate melancholias are connected to larger socio-historical phenomena (loci of power in modernity –

\textsuperscript{61} Morton, “The Dark Ecology of Elegy” (2010), 256. I expand on Morton’s understanding of elegy to include artistic elegies that are experienced visually and even immersively (in the case of installation artworks) rather than read.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid}, 253.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{65} Flatley 2008, 2.
such as colonialism, white supremacy, homophobia, war, revolution), and connects them to
“others with whom these melancholias might be shared. This knowledge, an ‘affective map,’
[…] is what, for them and for their readers, makes possible the conversion of a depressive
melancholia into a way to be interested in the world.”66 Like Rae, Flatley points out the powerful
political potential of dwelling with loss:

melancholia forms the site in which the social origins of our emotional lives can
be mapped out and from which we can see the other persons who share our losses
and are subject to the same social forces. We might say that the melancholic
concern with loss creates the mediating structure that enables a slogan – “The
personal is political” – to become a historical-aesthetic methodology. This
methodology’s questions are: Whence these losses to which I have become
attached? What social structures, discourses, institutions, process have been at
work in taking something valuable away from me? With whom do I share these
losses or losses like them? What are the historical processes in which this
moment of loss participates – in other words: how long has my misery been in
preparation? These are the questions, Affective Mapping argues, that must find
their way into the heart of an aesthetic practice if it is, in Walter Benjamin’s
words, to “arm one” instead of “causing sorrow.”67

One hundred years ago, modernist resistant elegists understood the socio-political power of
melancholy; its relevance today is undiminished.

In what I see as an inheritance of the ethical melancholia of modernist elegies for our era
of anthropogenic climate change and species loss, the visual ecological elegies that I create and
research attempt to stir viewers to feel their (humoral, melancholic, and shared) relationship to
the earth and to other species, to ask the sort of questions that Flatley lists above, and to
potentially (re)consider their capacity to be what Mick Smith would call “ecologists” – ethical
participants in “ecological community” who feel a responsibility to remediate and prevent
ecological losses. Smith explains the connections he sees between extinction, mourning,
ecological community, and ethics – and the potential power to be found therein:

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid, 3.
Perhaps, one might even say, the realisation of ecological community only begins to make sense through the senseless event of extinction. This pointless and irredeemable loss touches some of us in ways that reveal the infinite complications in trying to specify what is left in the wake of the death (finitude) of an entire mode of being(s). The ecologist (in a more than scientific sense) is someone who is touched by this loss in such a way as to mourn the toll of extinction instituted by human exceptionalism and exceptionalism. She is bereft and yet also understands that this feeling, her being touched by irrevocable loss, is itself a matter of realising the existence of a sense of an ecological and ethical and political community with other species. The species lost is not just a potential resource of which humans are deprived, but an example of exceptional ethical irresponsibility, one which can also incite (ethical) responsibilities and (political) resistance.68

Indeed, mourning, as James Stanescu writes in “Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals,” “is all about ethical, political, and ontological connections. […] Mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing kinship, and of recognizing the vulnerability and finitude of the other.”69 This recognition implies responsibility. Butler herself claims that ongoing mourning for “the irrecoverable” – for what is past but in an ongoing present that also implicates the future – “becomes, paradoxically, the condition of a new political agency.”70 For ecological activists and artists, the articulation and enacting of this agency, of this politicization and ethical engagement rooted in mourning and resistant melancholia, can take many forms, from the social to the aesthetic, all of which demonstrate a sense of connection and community among and across species.

An important difference between contemporary ecological anti-elegies and modernist anti-elegies is that while the latter sought to endlessly mourn deaths that had already happened in order to prevent future ones, the former is, as Rae, Morton, and I have noted, elegizing a death that has not yet occurred – at least not fully. The ‘ecocide’ we are witnessing is happening in slow motion (“slow violence,” as Rob Nixon calls it) compared to the genocides we have seen in

68 Smith 2013, 31.
69 Stanescu 2012, 568.
70 Butler 2003, 467.
the human conflicts of the 20th century. Nonetheless, species are going extinct at up to 10,000 times what is believed to be the ‘natural’ rate. In 1999 Don Leeson wrote: “[r]ight now, we are in the middle of a giant extinction event. Animals are disappearing forever at one hundred to one thousand times nature’s usual rate. Around the world, the dangers to animal life are great.”

Current estimates are significantly higher. The Center for Biological Diversity states that “[a]lthough extinction is a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural ‘background’ rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we’re now losing species at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day. It could be a scary future indeed, with as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century.” The Center goes on to confirm the fact that, unlike past extinction events, this one is definitely anthropogenic: “99 percent of currently threatened species are at risk from human activities, primarily those driving habitat loss, introduction of exotic species, and global warming. Because the rate of change in our biosphere is increasing, and because every species’ extinction potentially leads to the extinction of others bound to that species in a complex ecological web, numbers of extinctions are likely to snowball in the coming decades as ecosystems unravel.”

A UN report entitled *The Global Biodiversity Outlook* states that “we are currently responsible for the sixth major extinction event in the history of Earth, and the greatest since the dinosaurs disappeared.” Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone wrote in 2012 that as a result of “rising pollution, habitat destruction, and the disturbance wrought by climate change, the toll on wildlife has been enormous. A third of all amphibians, at least a fifth of all mammals,

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71 Leeson 1999, 105.
73 Ibid.
and an eighth of all bird species are now threatened with extinction.” And a 2014 study by the WWF and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) found that the past 40 years has seen a 50 per cent reduction in the number of wild vertebrate animals on Earth: “Creatures across land, rivers and the seas are being decimated as humans kill them for food in unsustainable numbers, while polluting or destroying their habitats.”

In his article in *The Guardian*, Confino cites the above data about the loss of other-than-human life, stating: “The question we should all be asking is why aren’t we on the floor doubled up in pain at our capacity for industrial scale genocide of the world’s species.” He asserts that “we need to grieve for the destruction we have wrought so that we have a chance to heal ourselves” – and our ecosystems.

Cunsolo Willox similarly argues that mourning “holds potential for expanding climate change discourse in politically and ethically productive ways.” There is ample evidence that total biospheric calamity is a very real possibility – yet potentially, as Confino suggests, a preventable one. So to return to modern elegies: the ethical demands of this genre seem even more potent and possible (and therefore hopeful) in the case of proleptic ecological elegy than in the case of past world wars and genocides – because there may still be time for us, even as ordinary individuals, to actively prevent the future deaths we may feel compelled to elegize and preemptively mourn.

Oppositional, melancholic, political ecological mourning can inform environmental ethics and interventions, transforming the overwhelmed fatalistic impotence of ‘climate despair’ into a

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76 Damian Carrington, “Earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past 40 years, says WWF”, *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014 http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf. Carrington goes on to quote Professor Ken Norris, ZSL’s director of science: “If half the animals died in London zoo next week it would be front page news... This damage is not inevitable but a consequence of the way we choose to live.” The article also quotes Mike Barratt, director of science and policy at the WWF: “We have lost one half of the animal population and knowing this is driven by human consumption, this is clearly a call to arms and we must act now.”
78 *Ibid*.
79 Cunsolo Willox, 137.
more active, hopeful, and productive engagement with ecological issues – a refusal to acquiesce to the death of the ecological world and a commitment to justice for other-than-human as well as human communities and environments.

We must find another relationship to nature besides reification, possession, appropriation and nostalgia. No longer able to sustain the fictions of being either subjects or objects, all the partners in the potent conversations that constitute nature must find a new ground for making meanings together. - Donna Haraway

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80 Haraway 2004, 126.
Chapter 3: Auguries

How might a genuinely radical ‘environmental ethics’ be characterised? Perhaps as an attempt to express our feelings for the natural world in a way that speaks for that world’s conservation. - Mick Smith

If we cannot learn to listen, perceive and feel our ecological connection, to enlarge our boundaries of compassion, then we will continue to wreak havoc not only on birds but also on all living species, with dire consequences for the Earth. And, ultimately, for ourselves. - Sara Angelucci

In “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning,” Ashlee Cunsolo Willox writes that the absence of discussion (in any sphere – academic, public, political) about ecology and other-than-human bodies as grievable or warranting mourning constitutes a “serious gap” in current climate change discourses, and that this is out of step with “the lived experiences of people around the globe.” She adds that “reconciling the private responses of environmentally-based loss with the relative absence of this grief in public and academic spheres is of the utmost importance” in this present epoch of climate crisis. My project attempts to aid in filling the gap that Cunsolo Willox identifies. As I wrote in the introduction above, ethico-aesthetic-affective interventions form an

81 Smith 2005, 147; some italics removed.
83 Cunsolo Willox “Climate Change as the Work of Mourning,” Ethics & the Environment, (Volume 17, Issue 2, 09/2012), 141.
84 Ibid.
85 While a comprehensive discussion of affect and affect theory is outside the scope of this text, I acknowledge the importance and depth of the topic. When I use the term “affect,” it is generally in the sense of its definition in the Oxford American Dictionary: “emotion or desire, esp. as influencing behavior or action.” I realize, however, that in academic and philosophical discussions of the term, its meaning is significantly more nuanced. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, the editors of The Affect Theory Reader (2010), explain affect as follows: “Affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation as well as the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. That is, affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward
integral part of a broader active, resistant, and remedial response to anthropogenic climate change, species loss, and industrial abuses of the biosphere. Such interventions provide an answer to Rob Nixon’s call in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* to “convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation driven technologies of our image-world,” and they begin to answer his question of how we might “turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time.”

Elegiac, haunting ecological thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations” (14). In “We Found Love in a Hopeless Place: Affect Theory for Activists,” Gabriel Winant offers a helpful explanation and history of affect theory, and one that is applicable to my discussion of the potentially transformative potential of ethico-political activism and artwork; Winant credits Brian Massumi and Gilles Deleuze, but also acknowledging in particular affect theory’s indebtedness to the struggles of women of colour as well as queer theorists. There are several moments in Winant’s text that are relevant to the work I am doing here. For example, he explains that “Affect offers a new approach to this old problem: What latent thing do you and I, two powerless individuals, share that might, if activated, endow us with a common sense of things, and from there a collective potency? Affect theory does not discover an authentic self buried by oppression; it constructs one anew from the wreckage of defeat. In doing so, it assembles collective knowledge against the devil on your shoulder that whispers that you are alone in this. […] The reparative impulse of affect theory — easily written off as individualist — can […] give shape to a collective movement” (2015, n/p). Finally, in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), Jill Bennett explores the affective potential of artworks, especially those that deal with trauma and loss; she discusses art as “a communicable language of sensation and affect […] a visual language of trauma and of the experiences of conflict and loss” (2) and explains that “a visual arts medium can, in distinctive ways, register and embody affect” (4). In her exploration of “the nexus between art and thought” she cites Deleuze’s concept of the “encountered sign,” stating that “feeling is a catalyst for critical inquiry or deep thought […]. For Deleuze, affect or emotion is a more effective trigger for profound thought because of the way in which it grasps us, forcing us to engage involuntarily” (7). Bennett, however, also distances herself from an understanding of affect as “emotion or sympathy” (9), discussing instead the “motility” of affect and forms of art that, “by virtue of [their] specific affective capacities, are able to exploit forms of embodied perception in order to promote forms of critical inquiry. This conjunction of affect and critical awareness may be understood to constitute the basis of an empathy grounded not in affinity (feeling for another insofar as we can imaging being that other) but on a feeling for another than entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible. […] It is precisely this conception of empathy as a mode of seeing that underpins [*Empathic Vision*], which argues for the capacity of art to transform perception” (10). Bennett’s connection between the affective/empathic potential of art, the stimulation of critical thought, and the possibility of perceptual transformation is in line with my argument.

86 Nixon 2011, 3.
artworks can form arresting, dramatic visual images and narratives that rouse viewers to awareness, feeling, and perhaps even transformative action.

So, as I explained above, rather than seeing proleptic, resistant elegy strictly as a phenomenon of the World Wars, I see the melancholic-elegiac sensibility and its urgent anticonsolatory ethic as an aesthetic method for achieving the “eco-ventionist” empathic attunement Suzi Gablik describes – a method that is increasingly relevant today in our world of ecological crisis, of human-made catastrophe, of what sometimes feels like a looming, already-underway apocalypse. When attempts at rationally explaining the urgency of climate issues and their relationship to our personal and societal choices and patterns of consumption have failed, narrative and aesthetic projects may yet be able to affect change by engaging people’s hearts and senses – tapping into empathy and feeling rather than intellect.87 Like Nixon, Thom van Dooren writes that narratives and stories are important methods for communicating ecological loss in a way that can create a feeling of “affective involvement in a loss”; citing Derrida, van Dooren states that this kind of “storied-mourning” does not seek consolatory strategies for recovering from loss, but rather “offers us the possibility of mourning as a deliberate act of sustained remembrance that requires us to interrogate how it is that we might ‘live with ghosts.’”88 He goes on to suggest that the mourning communicated and felt through images and stories can propel us, as both individuals and communities, “to face up to the dead and to our role in the coming into being of a world of escalating suffering, loss, and extinction.”89 Even a recent editorial in The Economist acknowledges the value of the arts in engaging ecological issues; it cites Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 (whose 2013 exhibition “Expo 1: New York”

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87 This point has been made in many contexts and by many writers. My source here is Theresa May’s Keynote Presentation “‘This Is My Neighborhood!’ – Community Identity, Ecology and Performance” at Staging Sustainability, a conference at York University, April 20, 2011.
89 Ibid., 143.
brought together various pieces dealing with climate change), stating that “at a time when climate is vanishing from the political agenda, [Biesenbach] believes art can ‘touch and disturb’ in ways that charts and articles cannot.” 90 Ecologically aware and engaged artworks answer Félix Guattari’s call to clarify the profound ecological questions of our time with a transversal “ecosophy” 91 whose methodologies are more artistic than scientific. Guattari further states that in order to attain this ecosophical subjectivity, we must “forge new paradigms that are […] ethico-aesthetic in inspiration.” 92 Decades before Guattari’s Three Ecologies, Marshall McLuhan wrote “I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it.” 93 Ecologically-engaged art is McLuhan’s warning system in action, on a mission to help us redirect our self-destructive trajectory.

Ecological loss is an increasingly pervasive feeling as the effects of industrial humanity’s impacts on the biosphere become more and more evident. As I alluded to above, Cunsolo Willox has researched and documented the “commonality of experiencing negative or emotional responses to environmental degradation” in her work on climate-related grieving and loss. 94 This widespread sense of loss has even occasioned the creation of a new field, “Extinction Studies,” as evidenced by the recent formation of the Extinction Studies Working Group, who describe their mission as follows:

We are a group of humanities scholars dedicated to the future of life in this time of extinctions. Our historical moment is one of unprecedented loss of planetary forms of life. Our research and writing is situated in a lively practice that emerges from our entanglement in these processes of loss.

92 Ibid, 25.
Four main themes inform our work: time, death, generations and extinction. Time carries the emerging richness of intergenerational life on earth. Death is the necessary counterpart to life enabling and nourishing new generations, which constitute ongoing patterns of embodied inheritance. In its current manifestation, extinction is the violent termination of these gifts of time, death and generations. Our vision for extinction studies is to engage with the profound implications of this cascade of loss.

In their piece entitled “Keeping Faith with Death: Mourning and De-extinction,” two of the members of this group, Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, connect an awareness of extinction with the importance of mourning. Citing Thomas Attig, they state that “grieving is a process of ‘relearning the world’” and that, in the context of ecological loss, “genuine mourning should open us into an awareness of our dependence on and relationships with those countless others being driven over the edge of extinction”; as such, “dwelling with extinction in this way – taking it seriously, not rushing to overcome it – might be the more important political and ethical work for our time. […] The reality […] is that there is no avoiding the necessity of the difficult cultural work of reflection and mourning. This work is not opposed to practical action, rather it is the foundation of any sustainable and informed response.”

Confino’s article in The Guardian, cited above, acknowledges this sense of profound loss and the vital importance of mourning, and takes the discussion into the mainstream media.

This eco-melancholic zeitgeist, which has been identified by Cunsolo Willox and Karen Landman in their forthcoming anthology Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief (in which a modified version of this chapter will be published), has found meaningful expression in the arts as well. In foregrounding resistant mourning and melancholia for ecological losses, ecologically elegiac artworks (a few of which I will describe below), like

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the ethical anti-war grieving of the modernist elegists, attempt to open spaces for affective, empathetic, and ultimately ethical responses. These works offer the possibility of transcending what Smith calls “human exemptionalism and exceptionalism” \(^97\) (or anthropocentrism), encouraging a sense of biospheric community (and potential resultant positive action on behalf of all vulnerable and grievable beings).\(^98\) Van Dooren’s recent book *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* – a poetic, empathetic, and detailed biography of five different bird species facing extinction – echoes these arguments in both content and form. In a chapter entitled “Grief in a Shared World,” he examines the grieving practices of endangered Hawaiian Crows, writing that his text is not “just about mourning. In addition, it aims itself to be an act of mourning: to tell stories about the dead and dying that draw them into relationship with the living.”\(^99\) He further explains that this is an attempt to dismantle and move beyond human exceptionalism, a distancing that has been at the core of the destructive modern human domination of animals and environments. He states that “[m]ourning offers us a way into an alternative space, one of acknowledgment of and respect for the dead. In this context, mourning undoes any pretense toward exceptionalism, instead drawing us into an awareness of the multispecies continuities and connectivities that make life possible for everyone.”\(^100\) He gestures toward “the possibility of our learning to mourn with crows for some of the many losses of life and diversity that take place within our shared world.”\(^101\) These impulses are part of a movement to work to heal widespread cultural ignorance of and disdain for the other-than-human, which

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\(^97\) Smith 2013, 31.

\(^98\) The notion of grievability is most notably presented in Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso Press USA, 2010). Interestingly, van Dooren diverges somewhat from Butler’s arguments about grievability: “mourning,” he writes, “is less about the ‘recognition’ or a valuable or ‘grievable’ life, and more about the simple embodied reality of our being more or less affected by others, more or less constituted by their presence, more or less emotionally and intellectually bound up in their fate” (163).

\(^99\) Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, 126

\(^100\) *Ibid*.

\(^101\) *Ibid*, 125.
has been subject to what Rae terms “systematic occlusions”\(^\text{102}\) from the sphere of the grievable. Indeed, artworks that encourage a greater understanding and feeling for the other-than-human can be what Cunsolo Willox describes as much-needed “mechanisms that can extend grievability to non-human bodies and recognize them as mournable subjects, particularly within discourses of climate change.”\(^\text{103}\) Artworks may act as lenses that enable a focusing of our fragmented attention on something beyond ourselves, resulting in a recognition and perhaps even valuing, however fleeting, of vulnerable others (indeed, a vulnerable world) under siege. What follows is a discussion of a small selection of such ecologically- and elegiacally-engaged artists and artworks.

Edward Burtynsky is internationally known for his large photographs of the effects of industrialization on the earth. The images in his *Oil series* in particular could be read as elegies that resonate with the ‘quantitative sublime’ (to borrow from Kant) that can also be seen in some anti-elegiac modernist and contemporary artworks (such as *Paths of Glory* by C.R.W. Nevinson [1917], whose ironic title was taken from Thomas Gray’s poem “Elegy Written In A Country

\(^{102}\) Rae 2007, 20.  
\(^{103}\) Cunsolo Willox, 141.
Church-Yard” [1750], and Personnes by Christian Boltanski [2010]); these works confront the viewer with overwhelming numbers of dead objects – or people – in an eternally present melancholic moment. Jonathan W. Marshall also reads mourning and melancholia into Burtynsky’s work: “Oscillating between formalistic containment and abject disintegration, Burtynsky’s oeuvre performs an act of mourning for the Modernist subject and the visual and industrial tropes which once sustained it, producing a series of theatrical relations which are at once melancholy and critically engaged, provocative and nostalgic, disturbing and formally reassuring.”

In his defence of modernist melancholia, Jonathan Flatley echoes Walter Benjamin in his assertion that the experience of modernity is “constitutively linked to loss.” Burtynsky’s painterly photographs illustrate with astonishing clarity the near-unimaginable scale and scope of modern industrialization (and thus the loss of huge areas of wilderness, thriving ecosystems, and so on), and in images such as Oxford Tire Pile #2, mounds of used tires evoke the unburied dead that haunt modernist anti-war elegies as a warning to those who remain alive.


105 Flatley 2008, 2.
106 See also the works of photographer Garth Lenz, whose series The True Cost of Oil features photos of the Alberta Tar Sands and its impact on the land; he also documents the lands of First Nations affected by the oil industry (http://garthlenz.com/#/touring-exhibit--the-true-cost-of-oil/editorial-42, accessed July 1, 2015).
Addressing a different aspect of the impact of modernity, Gwen Curry’s *Song of the Dodo* (1999) is an explicitly mournful ecological memorial, sombrely bearing the names of extinct species and their extinction dates – an absence of representational imagery reflecting the unfathomable absence that is extinction. Curry writes that “There is no room for irony in this very dark work.” She quotes Derek Besant’s commentary about the work in the catalogue for her 2001 solo exhibition, *Witness*: “There are no bones, no fingerprints, no photographs, or tracks in plaster. We must attempt to recall that which has already been removed. We are left to look for the missing pieces within ourselves.” Curry’s installation *Void Field (after Kapoor)*

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108 Ibid.
memorial tiles arranged expansively on the floor of a gallery – performs a similar work of mourning:

Void Field creates a sacred place of remembrance much like the floors of cathedrals whose crypts honour the deceased. Each of the tiles bears the name and date of extinction of a bird, mammal, fish, reptile or amphibian. This project was sad and humbling for me to do and it became a kind of atonement for our collective loss. When the work was shown in galleries there was a respectful hush and on one occasion when I was present a viewer burst into tears.109

Curry’s memorial works extend grievability to these forever-lost others, bringing the finality of their species death to the present. There is also a tacit sense of culpability that sensitive viewers may feel, knowing that most or all of those species (especially fabled ones such as the dodo and passenger pigeon110) perished as a direct result of human activity and asymmetrical relations with the other-than-human world, and knowing that this imbalance persists today. As such, this elegiac work adds to the narratives of loss that Nixon and van Dooren call for – stories that open space for affective engagement and hold loss and extinction in the present.

110 According to Chief Pokagom of the Chautauquan nation, the passenger pigeon was called O-me-me-wog by the Chautauquan. Qtd in William Butts Mershon, The Passenger Pigeon 1907, 48.
Combining Victorian parlour ghoulishness with contemporary ecological mourning and warning, Sara Angelucci’s *Aviary* (2013) series eerily melds images of extinct and endangered North American birds with “anonymous nineteenth century cartes-de-visite portraits,” and thus, in the artist’s words, “portray[s] creatures about to become ghosts.”

Evoking Flatley’s connection between modernity and loss, Angelucci’s artist statement connects these past and pending extinctions with imperialism’s toll on the human and other-than-human world:

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“The same colonial enterprise that drove the Victorians to expand their rule to a quarter of the world’s land and a fifth of its population, spurred a sense of callous entitlement over its creatures, hunted for sport and captured for the pleasure of entertainments.” The parallels with the exploitative excesses of contemporary consumer culture are clear, and Angelucci warns in both her images and words that it is more than the extinction of a few bird species that is at stake.

As Angelucci’s statement in the epigraph to this section makes clear, her uncanny, melancholic-elegiac images are motivated by empathy with the other-than-human. She asks: “what would it mean to embody another creature: Could one then see, feel, and understand its desire to live? Might we then imagine the Aviary portraits as chimera suspended in a state of empathy, and wonder what our treatment of other sentient beings might be if we could feel what they feel, or see what they see?”

Might we tarry with grief, as Butler asks? And might this tarrying or

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
melancholizing then be productive and creative? Angelucci was artist in residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in 2014 – the 100-year anniversary of the extinction of the passenger pigeon – and during that time she collaborated with musicians to produce a *Mourning Chorus*. The language of elegy and grieving in relation to the other-than-human (birds specifically) is prominent:

*A Mourning Chorus* is an elegy to endangered songbirds, a lament for species permanently lost to us, an expression of mourning for our suffering planet. The work was composed through improvisations inspired by a number of North American songbirds. The vocalists, trained in a range of traditions (including Georgian, Turkish, Anglo-Celtic, South Indian, Balkan, Jazz, operatic, popular, overtone and Inuit throat singing) and in extended vocal technique, were asked to move beyond mimicking birdsong to translate it through their own vocal cords, bodies and musical intelligence – merging birdsong and human-song. Singing as an act of empathy. Embodiment and empathy, as both a working methodology and a philosophy, formed the heart of our compositional approach.

The work encompasses a series of movements expressed through canons, duets, and forms of call and response, derived from an analysis of birdsongs. *A Mourning Chorus* ends in keening (from the Gaelic word *caoineadh*, meaning to cry, to weep) – a form of improvised vocal lament performed for the dead, and documented in various cultures around the world.\(^{114}\)

Also performed at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), this work made ecological mourning a public act, and, at least for the duration of the performance, attempted to focus the attention and empathy of those present on endangered and extinct birds – to make these avian others matter.

In the vein of avian mortality, Deborah Samuel’s photo series, entitled, fittingly, *Elegy* (2012), is a deathly portrait gallery of animal skeletons and various bones, eerily illuminated against pitch-black backgrounds. This series was produced in conjunction with the Royal Ontario Museum and the remains were photographed using scanners, hence the otherworldly glow that the bones seem to emanate. All of the photographs in the exhibit were accompanied by didactic panels identifying the species and, in some cases, commenting on the ecological threats.

that they are facing. Samuel’s inspiration for the series began with her pained response to the images of oil-coated pelicans in the wake of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill in 2010. According to Sarah Hampson, Samuel “wanted to photograph the stricken birds to stir public consciousness about society’s failure to protect other living things. But the government prohibited access to the site. And then she thought of another way to use birds to suggest the life they once embodied.”¹¹⁵

She quotes Samuel: “I thought, ‘If I can’t get to the birds, I will bring the birds to me.’”¹¹⁶ Matthew Wright’s interview with Samuel reveals that the artist “not only tried to imagine the relationships these animals had in life, but more importantly, those they would’ve had if not victimized by manmade disaster.”¹¹⁷ In empathetically reanimating these bones, Samuel refuses to bury the dead, to be resigned to unjust ecological losses; her elegies subtly resist these losses, and encourage us to do the same.


Chris Jordan’s *Midway: Message from the Gyre* photo series (which was the inspiration for the film I mentioned in my introduction) takes this macabre gaze to an even more visceral documentary level. He writes:

On Midway Atoll, a remote cluster of islands more than 2000 miles from the nearest continent, the detritus of our mass consumption surfaces in an astonishing place: inside the stomachs of thousands of dead baby albatrosses. The nesting chicks are fed lethal quantities of plastic by their parents, who mistake the floating trash for food as they forage over the vast polluted Pacific Ocean. For me, kneeling over their carcasses is like looking into a macabre mirror. These birds reflect back an appallingly emblematic result of the collective trance of our consumerism and runaway industrial growth. Like the albatross, we first-world humans find ourselves lacking the ability to discern anymore what is nourishing from what is toxic to our lives and our spirits. Choked to death on our waste, the mythical albatross calls upon us to recognize that our greatest challenge lies not out there, but *in here*.\(^{118}\)

These images of dead baby birds, revealing bellies full of recognizable plastic items, elicit strong reactions – disgust, sadness, grief, regret – in most viewers. Held in an eternal present, their corpses are not given the opportunity to participate in the consolatory cycle of decay and rebirth through the composting processes of ‘nature.’ Jordan’s images are truly melancholic, resistant elegies that refuse to bury this ongoing tragedy.


Like Jordan, biologist and artist Brandon Ballengée creates disturbing, morbid, and melancholic images (and even specimens) that clearly demonstrate the toxic impact of industrialized humanity on the other-than-human world. His recent exhibition, entitled *Collapse: the Cry of Silent Forms*, brings his research and art together, transmuting Ballengée’s “field research into metaphors that reveal the fragility of life forms in degraded ecosystems.” Like Samuels, Ballengée was moved by the devastation wrought by the BP oil spill. *Collapse* is a large installation consisting of 26,162 preserved aquatic specimens in glass jars stacked to form a pyramid. These specimens represent 370 species from the Gulf of Mexico, where Ballengée and his colleagues have been conducting research on “the global crisis of the world’s fisheries and the current threat for the unraveling of the Gulf of Mexico’s food-chain following the BP oil spill. The large-scale installation […] recalls the fragile inter-relationships between Gulf species. Empty containers represent species in decline or those already lost to extinction.” I am reminded here of the discussion above about the lost object being an unrepresentable absence.

Photo: Varvara Mikushkina

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Ballengée’s other recent works, *A Season in Hell Series: Deadly Born Cry*¹²¹ (2010/2011), and *Malamp: The Occurrence of Deformities in Amphibians*¹²² (1996–ongoing), include scanned photographs of dead and deformed birds and frogs, victims of ecological contamination and laboratory experimentation. The *Malamp* series includes a group of photographs of dead frogs that the artist calls *Reliquaries*, evoking the Catholic practice of preserving relics of dead saints. The artist writes: “They are scaled so the frogs appear approximately the size of a human toddler, in an attempt to invoke empathy in the viewer instead of detachment or fear: if they are too small they will dismissed but if they are too large they will become monsters. Each finished artwork is unique and never editioned, to recall the individual animal and become a reliquary to a short-lived non-human life.”¹²³ One of the other amphibian pieces, *Un Requiem pour Flocons de Neige Blessés (A Requiem for Wounded Snowflakes)* (2009/2012), a video collage of the bodies of deformed miniature toads found in southern Quebec with a meditative and sombre musical score, similarly endows these other-than-human beings with grievability. Ballengée’s commentary on the work includes the following: “In the case of these individuals, trauma during development resulted in terminal abnormalities. As they emerged to begin life on land severe deformations fated them to early death. This finite/infinite artwork is meant to be a memorial to these small creatures and in honor of the countless number of beings coming into this world and passing without our notice.”¹²⁴ In a compelling note, Ballengée adds the following instruction: “The artist asks though that once begun, the video should be played for infinity, until the extinction of

¹²⁴ Ballengée 2009/12, [http://brandonballengee.com/un-requiem-pour-flocons-de-neige-blesses/](http://brandonballengee.com/un-requiem-pour-flocons-de-neige-blesses/) (accessed Aug. 9, 2015). See also Ballengée’s series *The Frameworks of Absence* (2006-ongoing), a haunting memorial to extinct species in which the artist removes images of extinct species from books that were published at the time of that species’ extinction; he then burns the picture and offers the ashes to gallerygoers, who are invited to scatter the ashes in memory of the lost species. The series as well as installation shots can be viewed at [http://brandonballengee.com/the-frameworks-of-absence/](http://brandonballengee.com/the-frameworks-of-absence/) (accessed Aug. 9, 2015).
our species or until someone chooses to turn it off at which point the file should be deleted.” The piece’s title, the close and ominous presence of death, and the endless mourning implied in the artist’s statement reinforce the elegiac tone of these haunting, disturbing, deathly images. Like the artists I have mentioned above, Ballengée vividly presents melancholic ecological imagery that invites viewers to pause, reflect, and grieve.

Grieving, extinction, decolonization, social justice, and the interconnections between them feature prominently in the meditative, melancholic film installations of Kade Twist (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma). It’s Easy to Live With Promises If You Believe They Are Only Ideas (2012, seven channel video installation with sound) and Judeo Christian Western Scientific Worldview (2007, single channel video installation with sound),125 are video collages of slow-

125 All of Twist’s videos can be viewed on his website at http://nativelabs.com/ (accessed Aug. 9, 2015).
motion black-and-white footage of critically endangered California condors\textsuperscript{126} “held captive in a federal government endangered species breeding program,”\textsuperscript{127} accompanied by a gnawing, drilling, droning white noise or dirge. According to Twist, “The work is inspired by Suli, the great buzzard of Cherokee cosmogony, whose wings created the mountains and valleys of Cherokee homelands. […] [Suli] is also one of the archetypal tricksters and protagonists of Cherokee stories, particularly the stories that address issues of cultural, economic and ecological sustainability.”\textsuperscript{128} Twist states that his condor series “utilizes the relationship between the federal government and the California condor as a metaphor for examining the relationship between the federal government and American Indians.”\textsuperscript{129} His artist statement for \textit{It’s Easy to Live With Promises If You Believe They Are Only Ideas} further articulates the links between the condor and issues of ecological and social justice\textsuperscript{130}: 

The California condor is engaged as Suli in the vulnerable position of defying extinction. Within this context, the condor becomes an iconic and dynamic metaphor for examining Western paradigms of scientific and economic endeavor within the rubric of sustainability discourse. The narrative of the condor, in particular, is acutely relevant for evaluating numerous instances of collateral damage (ecological, biological, human and cultural) that exist (or once existed) in the wake of the epistemological, cosmological and spiritual frameworks of the Western worldview as actuated.

\textsuperscript{126} The IUCN lists California condors as critically endangered, with fewer than 250 individuals in the wild. The species’ near-extinction is “principally attributed to persecution and accidental ingestion of fragments from lead bullets and lead shot from carcasses” (lead poisoning). See BirdLife International 2013, “\textit{Gymnogyps californianus,” The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Version 2015.2), www.iucnredlist.org.}
\textsuperscript{127} Kade Twist, Artist Statement for \textit{Judeo Christian Western Scientific Worldview}, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4rHLI21G8PY.
\textsuperscript{129} Twist, Artist Statement for \textit{Judeo Christian Western Scientific Worldview}, 2010.
\textsuperscript{130} Vandana Shiva makes this connection explicit in \textit{The Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth: “The rights of the Earth are ultimately intertwined with the rights of the people. […] The Rights of Mother Earth are the very basis of the human rights of people to land and natural resources, food and water, to livelihoods and basic needs. […] Without Earth Rights, there can be no human rights. It is time to deepen human rights by deepening the recognition that humans depend on the Earth. […] Defending the Rights of Mother Earth is therefore the most important human rights and social justice struggle of our times” (34).}
through economic expansion, land development and the pursuit of the arts of civilization.

The condor as metaphor, and the narrative of the condor in recovery, provide a critical lens for reconsidering the succession of cause and effect relationships that are repetitiously configured and reconfigured by the Western worldview as it is expressed through the phylogenetic lineages of its market driven systems: 1) a subject is placed in peril by an entity, or system, for perceived notions of progress; 2) the subject’s sustainability is severely, or permanently compromised; 3) the entity, or system, then attempts to save the subject for perceived notions of progress; 4) the resulting actions then serve to gratify the savior’s worldview and further advance its legitimacy – politically, economically, socially and culturally.

*It’s Easy to Live With Promises If You Believe They Are Only Ideas* does not seek to exploit or undermine the traditions of the Western worldview; nor is it a work of cultural chauvinism. Instead, it is an attempt to use art as a mechanism to elicit a thoughtful examination of the Western worldview’s byproducts and inject an Indigenous worldview into the discourse of the public sphere. The goal is not to point fingers, but to pursue balance where future scenarios of market articulation thoughtfully consider and include Western and Indigenous worldviews simultaneously. The intention of the work is to find the continuity of Indigenous knowledge systems and metaphor, past and present, as a means of strengthening the viability and relevancy of sustainability discourse.131

The one constant image in *It’s Easy to Live With Promises If You Believe They Are Only Ideas* is a baby condor in an incubator, being tended by a puppet – a replica of a mother condor with a human hand inside (presumably a researcher in a government captive breeding or wildlife rescue program), stuck through a hole in the side of the incubator. This is a chilling analogy for both “Western Scientific” interventions into ecological phenomena, as well as North American governmental treatment of indigenous peoples – children separated from their parents and raised by the state, nations removed from their traditional lands. The California condor has nearly been driven to extinction by the actions of industrialized, colonial humanity, and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island have been and continue to be subject to genocidal policies that have in fact caused the extinction and near extinction of many nations, languages, and cultures. Twist’s works elegize these broken relations; the black-and-white format, the use of slow motion, and the

131 Twist, Artist Statement for *It’s Easy to Live With Promises If You Believe They Are Only Ideas* (2012).
infinite looping (when shown in an exhibition space) bring a kind of perpetual melancholy to the work, and the underlying sound is haunting and unsettling, like unresolved grieving.

There are many responses to modernity, colonialism, industrialization, climate change, and ecological catastrophe (which is inextricably linked to human catastrophe). Grieving is one very real response. In expressing perpetual (albeit resistant and hopefully politically potent) mourning, the artworks I have described, like the resistant elegies of modernist artists coping with the damage done by the World Wars, give voice to feelings that many of us have but do not know how to express – to the emotional dimensions of an unimaginably vast loss that spans the past, present, and potentially also the future. This expression can be part of a process of healing, starting with the first link in a chain described in The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt’s
motto: “Remember Understand Educate Act.” While projects like Jordan’s and Ballengée’s also participate in aiding understanding through pedagogical components, elegiac works focused on the uncomfortable act of remembering and representing ecological loss can be an articulation of individual or collective pain, an act of feeling which can be the essential first step in a journey toward more positive and proactive ways of addressing the great problems of our time. In order to be restored to an ethical, ecological, and ultimately hopeful sense of time and responsibility, we must soberly confront the past and present; we must remember the damage and our various roles in it – and this is what the ethico-aesthetic work of ecological elegy aims to do. “Now is a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world,” says Morton, echoing Joanna Macy and other ecological activists in a call to embrace the elegiac melancholia of proleptic, resistant ecological mourning – to insist on remembering as a “crucial task of continuous mindfulness” in order to prevent further damage and to create a better world for future life on earth. The


132 Quilt2012, Website of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, 2012, http://quilt2012.org/ (accessed October 12, 2012). The Quilt is a melancholic project that insists on remembering, even dwelling on death as an ethical and activist gesture. A highly successful awareness- and fundraising endeavour, the quilt has over 48,000 panels featuring over 94,000 names, and has been viewed by over 18 million visitors (NAMES Project Foundation 2011).
133 Morton 2007, 185.
134 Macy 2012, 223.
artworks I have discussed here elegize past, present, and potential future losses, holding viewers in a present-continuous of ecological death and anthropogenic loss – inviting us to feel a persistent and resistant grief. I believe that the empathetic space opened by ecological elegy can remind viewers and participants that we are all part of earth’s ecological community, with a responsibility to care for and preserve all of the beings who share this biosphere. Or, less ambitiously, I would suggest that even brief moments of engagement and feeling about and for an other-than-human ecological community are a vital component of confronting the reality of this stage of the Anthropocene. Elegiac artworks can provide a safe or even sacred space for pain to be concretized, shared, and worked through, providing viewers and participants with relief, if just for a moment, from the paralysis that can come with sensitivity to the world’s problems. In a time of fragmented attention and numbed affect, even just a few moments of presentness and of feeling feelings have profound value.

Mick Smith stresses the value of “affectual expression” and “structures of feeling” in his discussions of environmental ethics, and ecologically elegiac artists often work from a place

135 Jill Bennett credits Paul Crutzen with popularizing this term, which emphasizes the epochal, ecological, and even geological impact of humanity on the earth, in an “era” that has only lasted about 250 years. Bennett, Living in the Anthropocene (Monograph for dOCUMENTA (13): 100 Notizen - 100 Gedanken No. 053. Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012), 4-5.

136 Emanuele Senici discusses moments when art forms bring viewers (or readers) to tears, which “makes us feel in touch with our innermost emotions and thus seems to prove the affectively redemptive function of art, which is often thought to be its most important role in the modern world” (Senici, “Giuseppe Verdi: Simon Boccanegra,” The Opera Quarterly (January 2007), 23 (1): 142). I would not go so far as to claim that ecological art is “affectively redemptive” nor that viewers need to be redeemed, but I would stress the value of affect, in particular in the sense that Senici seems to be using it – feeling that has the potential to be transformative (see my lengthy discussion of affect in footnote #86 above).

137 Smith, “Citizens, denizens and the Res publica: Environmental ethics, structures of feeling and political expression,” ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES 14, 2 (May 2005), 145-162. Smith explains that “structures of feeling” are “those culturally variable patterns of emotionally mediated responses, that provide the (shifting) grounds for all ethical experience, motivation, communication and interpretation” (145). He further defends “the ethico-political importance of affectual expression” and discusses how “having feelings for nature […] might be related to expressing those feelings and speaking for (on behalf and in favour of) nature […] inter-linked issues [that] might be referred to as the ‘affectual’, ‘expressive’ and ‘advocational’ aspects of environmental ethics respectively.” He states that “affectual” refers to more than an “emotional attachment to nature. My concern here is with any other-directed feelings that might be produced in the dialectic between natural things and ourselves, such as care, fear, wonder, love, loss and hope. In ‘expressing’ these feelings we not only give voice to our concerns, we make
of feeling that is infused with factual and theoretical information from our research. Nicole Shukin has emphasized the role of artists in “mak[ing] amorphous calamities visible”¹³⁸ and Norah Bowman-Broz states that “artists draw us in to the affective intensity of these intense [ecological] events.”¹³⁹ As maps of the affective terrain of our fraught relationships to the ecological world in crisis, these projects create space for an expression of how many of us feel about climate change, responsibility, ecological loss, and the future of the biosphere. Morton asks: “Isn’t this lingering with something painful, disgusting, grief-striking, exactly what we need right now, ecologically speaking?”¹⁴⁰ This work is indeed painful and mucky, inhabiting a place of acute awareness, melancholic mourning, and ethical grief. Fredric Jameson states that the role of the political artist is to create place, to help us locate ourselves against the disorientation and confusion of late capitalism¹⁴¹ – and this is part of the contribution that melancholic ecological elegies make. If we can locate ourselves in a place of affective and empathetic kinship with the other-than-human world, we will be in a position to be interpellated or pulled, as Levinas would have it, by the ecological Other, expanding our ethical orientation to include care for those Others with whom we may have nothing in common.¹⁴²

This opening to the ecological other is the crux of ecological artwork; it is the intersection of ethics and affect, which is the territory of resistant mourning and proleptic elegy. Morton writes that it is the task of ecological elegy to provoke an awareness of the reality of our

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¹³⁸ Nicole Shukin, Plenary talk at Space + Memory = Place, conference of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (Thursday August 9, 2012, UBC Okanagan, Kelowna, BC).
¹³⁹ Norah Bowman-Broz, “Radical Re-Alignments in Human Communities: Living with the Anomalous Mountain Pine Beetle in Northern B.C.”, presentation at Space + Memory = Place (Saturday August 11, 2012).
¹⁴⁰ Morton 2007, 197.
interdependent or interconnected (i.e. truly “ecological”) relations with the other-than-human world, resisting the “comfortable” anthropocentrism and human-“nature” schism upon which Western humanity relies.\textsuperscript{143} Realizing our ecological interconnections gives new meaning to anthropogenic extinctions and ecosystem destruction. Thom van Dooren and Bird Rose insist that our response to these realities must start with mourning:

In this complex context, we do not need the promise of a new techno-fix that allows us to reverse the unimaginable. Rather, what is needed is the kind of difficult reflection and discussion that forces us – as individuals and cultures – to \textit{dwell} with our actions and their consequences, and in so doing – maybe, just maybe – begin to wind back the current rate of extinctions. […] What the current time demands is a genuine reckoning with ourselves as the agents of mass extinction. In short, we need to \textit{mourn}, to spend a little time with the dead; to keep faith with death and in so doing to own up to the reality of the world that we are ushering in.\textsuperscript{144}

However, to end on a less melancholic note, I believe that we can change the picture, but only if we recognize that there is a problem, acknowledging what Joanna Macy, a scholar of deep ecology, Buddhism, and systems theory, calls “our generation’s crime against the future;” she suggests that we must “stop trying to hide and bury our shame.”\textsuperscript{145} Ecologically eolian artworks attempt this intervention, providing a new and often horrible view – one that might make us \textit{feel} in such a way that we cannot help but act to prevent the apocalyptic visions we are seeing. Macy states that despite the potentially overwhelming scale and scope of ecological problems, “we have the ability, through our moral imagination, to break out of our temporal prison and let longer expanses of time become real to us […] for a livable world, we must learn to reinhabit time […] and encourage a sense of responsibility to coming generations.”\textsuperscript{146} We can

\textsuperscript{143} Morton, “Dark Ecology,” 256. I continue this discussion below in the section about my artwork \textit{Augury : Elegy}.
\textsuperscript{145} Macy 2012, 224.
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Ibid}, 217.
resolve, she states, to be “guardians” of the world on behalf of future life, and this resolution “heals our relationship to the future and to ourselves.”

Macy discusses “active hope” not as blind optimism, but as a process of confronting the reality of our fraught world, grieving, and choosing to be motivated by a vision of a different and preferable future. Thom van Dooren similarly refers to hope as “care for the future.”

The reason why combating despair for effective personal action on climate change matters relates to the instrumental value of hope in securing effective agency, remembering that hope is despair’s opposite. Hope can increase the probability that a person’s agency achieves its purpose, and so can galvanise the person’s will as it aims at this purpose. [...] Hope keeps open a space for agency between the impossible and the fantastical; without it, the small window in time remaining for us to tackle climate change is already closed.

As Macy suggests, active hope demands a vision of what we want – a positive goal to work for, not just a negative image to fight against. This is where eco-art steps in – bioremedial, utopian, collaborative, community-based, participatory – creating new possibilities for a future of symbiotic collaboration and cooperation within this ecological community.

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147 Ibid, 224.
150 Beth Carruthers defines eco-art as “a broad field of interdisciplinary arts practice, distinguished from Land Art and Environmental Art by its specific focus on world sensitive ideologies and methodologies. EcoART [sic] practice seeks to Restore, Protect and Preserve the world for its own sake, and to mediate human/world relations to this end” (Mapping the Terrain of Contemporary Ecoart 2006, 3). “As well as direct actions and interventions with land and waters, EcoART practices tackle dangerous ideologies. They are adaptive, hybrid and flexible, informed by fields of knowledge as diverse as the natural sciences, landscape architecture and engineering. Local understanding and a reawakened appreciation for the agency and ecological significance of such non-human elements as birds, fish, forests and watersheds help bring the work into focus” (“Art, Sweet Art,” 26). Carruthers writes engagingly and persuasively about the transformative potential of eco-art in Praxis: Acting as if Everything Matters: “works and practices do in fact bring about transformation in both worldviews and behaviours through reengaging people in ecological relationships that are embodied and emotional. They do this through education, which presents as opportunities for learning in many forms; through conversation, which is also collaboration, an opportunity for learning, as well as for revelation; through community, both by acknowledging and foregrounding the ecological community of a region, to which human and non-human alike belong, and by engaging with local communities in the making and presenting of the works” (42).
PART 2:

Augury : Elegy : Indicator
(Analytical Archive of Artworks)

A Robin Red Breast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.
A dove house filld with doves & Pigeons
Shudders Hell thro all its regions.
[...]
A sky lark wounded in the wing,
A Cherubim does cease to sing.
[...]
He who shall hurt the little Wren
Shall never be beloved by Men.

- William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”, c. 1807

The reality [...] is that there is no avoiding the necessity of the difficult cultural work of reflection and mourning. This work is not opposed to practical action, rather it is the foundation of any sustainable and informed response.

- Deborah Bird Rose and Thom Van Dooren

Chapter 4: Introduction and Methodology

As I have stated above, this project lays bare my affective-aesthetic response to what Macy has termed “crime[s] against the future,” not motivated by the desire to instil guilt in others, but rather by my attention to my own feelings and the imagery that I find emerging from them (I admit that I am also motivated by the desire, as Flatley ascribed to Baudelaire, to inspire transformations from ennui to spleen). This imagery has taken a variety of forms, including drawing and painting, sculpture, found-object-assemblage, installation, bookworks, poetry,

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curatorial practice, and even sound installations. While I have stated my hope that such artworks may be catalysts for change, I do not expect that this will be the case, nor do I have sufficient evidence to prove this; rather, I see my artworks as posing questions, reminding viewers about disturbing phenomena, and providing space for feeling ecological feelings, which in themselves are, as I have stated above, significant interventions in an age of fragmented attention and numbed affect. In *The Practice of Cultural Studies*, Johnson *et al.* refer to cultural studies as a field in which all projects can be, “more or less explicitly, a working out of experience and value in the world, the search for a personal point of view and a contribution, however modest, to wider ethics and politics.”153 My project most certainly endeavours to make a unique contribution to wider ethics and politics; methodologically, my “working out,” my “search” involves many strategies, drawn from my interdisciplinary background and training in English literature, studio art, history, cultural studies, and women’s studies, as well as my engagement with social justice, ecological activism, music, bibliophilia, and antique-shop, forest-floor, and curbside collecting practices. Throughout this endeavour, my “methodological vocabulary” (to quote Rebecca Duclos) has manifested in “processes that are often intuitive, associative, synchronous, non-linear, and highly subjective”154 (perhaps a non-methodological methodology?). The manifestation of my messy methodology is an ongoing constellation, assemblage, or collage of texts, images, objects, interventions, and exhibitions.

As I mentioned above, I see my project as an ecology or constellation of ideas and images. Walter Benjamin writes that “Ideas are timeless constellations,”155 and as Graeme Gilloch explains in his discussion of Benjamin’s concept of the constellation, ideas can emerge

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and express themselves as artworks, or groupings of artworks, whose relationships to one another are themselves part of the work’s thesis, argument, and method: “The ‘idea’ is conceived as a constellation of artworks, of disparate phenomena which combine to form a legible pattern.”  

Echoing Benjamin, experimental filmmaker and theorist Gary Kibbins advocates a collage approach to art-knowledge-production, arguing that, as a “conversation between heterogeneous elements” the relationships between these elements are what create meaning in collage works. He cites Victor Burgin, claiming that art, in its difference from other forms of research, theory, and discourse, is in a unique position to pose (political) questions from its point-of-view that cannot otherwise be posed. It is my aim to provoke viewers to feel uncomfortable feelings and pose challenging questions of themselves and their world, and the collage form fits well with my trans-/interdisciplinary approach. The potentialities for working through issues of power, politics, ecological ethics, and creative resistance to hegemony through the collage form are exciting affirmations of my continued work in various mediums – my collage of elegiac ecological artworks.

In the pages that follow I will describe, discuss, and provide documentation for this ongoing constellation or collage of exhibitions, interventions, installations, and performances which have been in the process of unfolding temporally and spatially over the past four years, with Augury: Elegy forming the centrepiece, and which will continue to grow in the future. I have exhibited many of these works in Kingston (various dates in 2011-2012), Ottawa (April 2012), Kelowna, BC (August 2012), and Toronto (2013-2015).

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158 Ibid.
Chapter 5:  
AUGURY : ELEGY (and related works)  

Overview  

On New Year’s Day 2011, news of unexplained mass bird flock deaths began to appear in the headlines, starting with 4,000 or so blackbirds having dropped dead out of the sky on New Year’s Eve in Beebe, Arkansas. This bizarre and apocalyptic phenomenon was the elegiac inspiration for the piece entitled Augury : Elegy (images of death raining from the sky and piles of bones crowded my thoughts that winter), but I had been already been thinking in a similar vein in the year or so prior. On a trip to Kingston in early summer 2010, when I was making my final decision about attending Queen’s, my sister and I found a severed bird’s wing on the sidewalk; I took it home and made drawings of it as well as another wing I found in Toronto, and eventually included them in an installation with Augury : Elegy. I had also been making drawings of mother birds watching over their nests, with their chicks in the nests, mouths open for food; I did these drawings in graphite, with no colour except for the chicks’ open mouths, which I painted a jarring red – transforming, it seems to me, an image of comfort into an almost grotesque one of distress and warning. In most of the images, the mother birds are unfinished, fading into nothingness – an augury of loss. I found the models for these drawings in a book of North American songbirds, many of which are threatened due to human activity.
All artworks and photographs of artworks in this section are by Jessica Marion Barr unless otherwise noted.
In October 2010 I attended a concert at Kingston’s Chalmers United Church, and noticed the angels in the chancel’s exquisite stained glass windows. The angels’ wings are the colours of fire and autumn – yellow, orange, red, burgundy – and it occurred to me that I might make a pair of these wings using autumn leaves instead of feathers. I began collecting and pressing leaves, and I found the top of an antique coffee table at the curb on garbage day, and cut wings out of the wood. I then attached an army surplus leather harness. As I thought more about the wings, I realized that they were Icarus’s wings; the metaphor for industrial, consumerist humanity is obvious: flying hubristically close to the sun, doomed to be burnt. And then all those birds fell out of the sky too. Not like Icarus exactly (the birds weren’t doing anything wrong), but rather an omen or sign that our flight, which began slowly with the Industrial Revolution and accelerated after the World Wars, will crash if we do not change course. So I burnt the wings, dripped melted beeswax on them, and called them *Fall*.
Around this time, I also began making portraits of extinct bird species in conté on brown paper, starting with the passenger pigeon, which seemed fitting, given its notoriety as a casualty of human excess. The approach of the 100-year anniversary of both the passenger pigeon’s extinction and the outbreak of World War One added resonance to my practice and research.
Process of Making AUGURY : ELEGY

As I mentioned above, the mass bird flock deaths captivated me, seeming like such a clear indication of the deadly effects of modern industrial humanity’s impact on the world. I knew I had to make a piece about this phenomenon and this feeling, and that this piece would inevitably be politically charged – a resistant elegy rather than a passive memorial. This is particularly apt for a Cultural Studies dissertation. This field, according to Magda Lewis, understands that all activity is political; it questions things we are encouraged not to question; it breaks boundaries, reconfigures language, and fractures hegemony. In the spirit of boundary-breaking, I take a cue from “maintenance artist” Mierle Laderman Ukeles, whose art is (and/or is about) her everyday “maintenance work” and routines. Ukeles’s 1969 Manifesto for Maintenance Art, written as she was struggling to understand her life as an artist and new mother (which I understand all too well since the birth of my son in January 2014), questions and rejects “binary systems of opposition that articulate differences between art/life, nature/culture, and public/private” and challenges “the modernist myth with its dualistic assumptions privileging linear progress over the repetitive tasks required to maintain people, places, cities, and environments.” I, too, question the boundaries between academic work (and artwork) and life (as well as those between “nature”/culture and other unhelpful binaries). I am enacting a blending of these spheres as my art and research projects demand work not only in the office and studio, but also in the grocery store, kitchen, and in social spaces. In order to collect enough bones to make the thick cloud that I was envisioning for Augury : Elegy, I approached the deli

160 Magda Lewis, lecture for Cultural Studies Methodologies, Graduate Seminar in the Department of Cultural Studies at Queen’s University, January 19, 2011.
department of the local Metro grocery store in early 2011. They told me that they regularly threw significant numbers of chicken carcasses into the trash after they had removed most of the flesh to make sandwiches. I asked them if they would set the bones aside for me, and they happily agreed to do so. This was great news for my bone collection, but it presented an awkward situation – when I picked up my first batch of bones, they were still covered in flesh and skin (the staff had misunderstood my request and apparently thought I was using the bones for soup stock; they thought I would appreciate the edible bits). My environmental and personal ethics mean that I avoid eating animals, particularly when they were factory farmed.\footnote{See, for example, “Livestock a major threat to environment”, \textit{FAO Newsroom} (November 29, 2006), \texttt{www.fao.org/newsroom/en/news/2006/1000448/index.html} (accessed April 12, 2011).} But I cannot abide seeing edible food go to waste, so I decided to ‘feed two birds with one scone’ – I called my mother and asked her how to make chicken soup. The benefits of this were twofold: I got my clean bones, and several of my friends and neighbours got delicious, home-cooked soup (about 45 bowls in total). As I carefully – almost surgically – pulled the soft, cooked flesh from the bones (initially using stainless steel utensils as I could not bring myself to use my hands; then after this proved too slow using rubber-gloved hands), simultaneously feeling revolted, fascinated, and numbed by the repetitiveness of the task (or “maintenance activity,” as Ukeles would term it), I realized that cooking, artmaking, and theorizing had become indistinguishable.
After drying the bones in my oven, I began to string them on crochet thread inherited from my great-great Aunt Hazel; the strands gradually took over my apartment. Our lives, like our ecosystems, are not (although we may want them to be) discreetly compartmentalized. As Félix Guattari states in The Three Ecologies, “nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere, and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think ‘transversally.’”\textsuperscript{164} An ecofeminist worldview, according to Mies and Shiva, embraces transverse thinking and refuses divisions—subsistence and culture/knowledge are interwoven, as are freedom and “loving interaction and productive work in co-operation with Mother Earth.”\textsuperscript{165} They quote Ynestra King, one of the organizers of a seminal conference on ecofeminism in 1980, as stating that “Ecofeminism is


\textsuperscript{165} Mies and Shiva, 13.
about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice.”¹⁶⁶ As I have recently realized, and as my projects attempt to illustrate, an ecofeminist understanding of the interconnectedness of life, subsistence, knowledge, and culture is the foundation of my praxis.

¹⁶⁶ Qtd. in Mies and Shiva, 14.
The finished ‘bone mobile,’\textsuperscript{167} suspended from a tangled spiral of branches salvaged from my landlord’s spring pruning, originates in my ecological grieving and viscerally and proleptically mourns and warns about species loss, with hundreds of chicken bones standing in for the billions of birds dying annually due to human activity.\textsuperscript{168} I wrote the following text to accompany \textit{Augury : Elegy}:\textsuperscript{169}

Just before midnight on New Year’s Eve 2011, in Beebe, Arkansas, 4,000 or so blackbirds fell out of the sky, dead. Around the same time, several hundred grackles, redwing blackbirds, robins, and starlings dropped dead in Murray, Kentucky. A few days later, 500 dead blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, grackles, and starlings were found on a highway in Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, while 200 dead American coots appeared on a bridge in Big Cypress Creek, Texas. On January 4, in Falköping, Sweden, 100 jackdaws were found dead in

\textsuperscript{167} In terms of the aesthetic and construction of the piece, I noted a similarity to Cornelia Parker’s \textit{Hanging Fire (Suspected Arson)} (1999) (see www.northeastern.edu/universityscholars/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/IMG_0183.jpg, accessed Aug. 11, 2015).

\textsuperscript{168} If food production is included, this number is in the tens or hundreds of billions. In 2014, in the US alone, 8,666,662,000 chickens were slaughtered, according to the US Department of Agriculture (“Poultry Slaughter 2014 Summary,” February 2015, http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/current/PoulSlauSu/PoulSlauSu-02-25-2015.pdf, 5).

\textsuperscript{169} I had initially hoped to have \textit{Augury : Elegy} hanging in the entry to an exhibition space, forcing viewers to pass through it – physically touching the desiccated hanging bones – in order to enter the space. This proved impossible due to the materials: the dried bones were rough and the soft crochet thread instantly adhered to any bone it touched, creating a tangle when the strands were disturbed. Thus the piece had to be viewed as a sculpture rather than an immersive experience. I was invited to contribute a larger version of \textit{Augury : Elegy} (expanding it into a horseshoe shape that viewers could walk into) to a proposed exhibition on the theme of endangered species and climate change curated by Katherine Dennis, who submitted her plan for this exhibition to an international competition for young curators at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris; while Dennis’s proposal was not accepted, it made it into the top 100 out of 600 entries in this highly competitive process, and she plans to mount the exhibition at a large venue in Canada. So I am still in the process of collecting more bones and expanding my piece.
the street. And then on January 5, some 1,000 dead turtle doves rained down on
the town of Faenza in Italy. Later last year, on October 23, 6,000 dead birds
washed up on the south-eastern shore of Ontario’s Georgian Bay, and then,
remarkably, Beebe was again showered with the bodies of 5,000 blackbirds on
New Year’s Eve 2012.\textsuperscript{170}
It seems a little apocalyptic.
One might well ask whether this series of mass deaths is a microcosm of
humanity’s increasingly toxic impact on the non-human world. But we are not
just poisoning an isolated wilderness “out there.” We are poisoning our
ecosystems – our sources of food, water, and air; our only home. The warnings
are everywhere, if only we would choose to see and heed them. Because those
were a lot of canaries, and we’re all in this coalmine together.

Augury refers to signs and omens, and relates to the ancient Roman tradition of
interpreting the behaviour (or the bones or guts) of birds as a sign of divine approval or
disapproval.\textsuperscript{171} In \textit{Ecology Without Nature}, Morton writes: “An augury is a prophecy written in
the tea leaves, in the guts of a bird, in the real – ecomimesis. It is knowledge that is somehow
imprinted in the real, a stain on the horizon announces the presence of a significant Beyond. But
this Beyond is sick: we can read it in the tea leaves. This is an everyday experience for people
living in a time of intense war\textsuperscript{172} – as it is an everyday experience for those of us living now
who are aware of the severity of the ecological situation. This work attempts to communicate
the feeling that the current ecological crisis will augur an elegy if humanity continues on the
destructive path of industrial capitalist modernity. The piece, which hangs like a frozen
raincloud, is ostensibly an elegy for the thousands of birds that perished in the flock deaths, but
is also a broader lamentation for the other-than-human in the Anthropocene, as well as a warning
– a visualization of the sense that these events ‘augur ill’ for the future.

\textsuperscript{171} The word augury is derived from the Latin \textit{augurium}, “interpretation of omens,” from \textit{augur}, “diviner” (OED).
Indeed, in a letter written to me after viewing the installation, Patricia Rae stated:

“[Augury : Elegy] is related, I think, to the ‘proleptic elegy’ idea I’ve been trying to work with: your piece suggests some sort of ‘raining’ of disaster that hasn’t just happened and isn’t just happening but that will continue to happen if, as you say, we don’t do something about it.”

Augury : Elegy is a timely piece, and it joins the work of Angelucci, Ballengée, Samuel, Twist, and other contemporary ecologically-engaged artists in evoking, like the modernist resistant elegies I have discussed, what Tammy Clewell calls an “anticonsolatory practice of mourning.”

173 Patricia Rae, Personal Correspondence, July 10, 2011.
174 Clewell 2004, 199.
that draws attention, however painful, to our era’s catastrophic losses, which include the undeniable reality that the biosphere is suffering as a result of human intervention and the ongoing profit-driven destruction of the world’s land, water, and air.

Birds are particularly conspicuous casualties of this violence. According to Erikson et al., anthropogenic avian mortality (resulting from human activities excluding food production) “may total between 100 million and 1 billion birds per year in the United States alone.” In addition to that staggering number, bird populations worldwide are being negatively impacted by climate change, which, by altering temperatures, ecosystems, and habitats, affects birds’ lives and population sizes. Indeed, “changes of abundance or behaviour of birds presumably resulting from climate change are among the best documented changes reported in the animal world.” Alongside species (and species groups or genera) such as bees, bats, corals, and fish, birds are “crucial indicators of ecosystem health. Changes in bird populations signal changes in the ecosystems we depend on for vital environmental services such as food, clean air, and water.” In “Extinction: a matter of life and death?” Joe Gelonesi states that “[b]irds are a powerful symbol of degrading biodiversity. They share a curious relationship with human communities, and can be seen at the centre of rites, rituals and other meaning-making activities. Their retreat often signals a weakening of the human community itself, a victim of its own

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175 Qtd. in Podolsky 2010, 11.
176 See, for example, Andrew E. McKechnie and Blair O. Wolf, “Climate change increases the likelihood of catastrophic avian mortality events during extreme heat waves”, Biology Letters 6 (2010), 253-256.
177 Miller-Rushing 2010, 295-6.
178 Moller et. al. 2010, 3.
180 According to the World Wildlife Fund: “An indicator species is a species or group of species chosen as an indicator of, or proxy for, the state of an ecosystem or of a certain process within that ecosystem. Examples include crayfish as indicators of freshwater quality; corals as indicators of marine processes such as siltation, seawater rise and sea temperature fluctuation; peregrine falcons as an indicator of pesticide loads; or native plants as indicators for the presence and impact of alien species” (World Wildlife Fund, 2012. “Know Your Flagship, Keystone, Priority and Indicator Species,” Worldwildlife.org, http://wwf.panda.org/about_our_earth/species/flagship_keystone_indicator_definition/2012).
environmental destruction.”\(^{180}\) As my 1,000 Flyers project (described below) also implies, our unsustainable patterns of consumption are ineluctably linked to species decline and extinction. The chicken bones in Augury : Elegy also hint at the ecological problem of the over-consumption of meat, in particular that produced in factory farms, which, in addition to issues of animal ethics, are major polluters.\(^{181}\) In this work, I am trying to communicate the kind of resistant ecological mourning that could potentially motivate awareness and sustainable practices.\(^{182}\)

Because we must not simply remember, we must act. So while Augury : Elegy has a strongly melancholic, elegiac tone, it is my ultimate hope that, to reiterate Rae’s point, this ethic of melancholic mourning carries with it possibilities for positive social change.

In the summer of 2012, I gave a conference presentation which included a performance of sorts: with images of Augury : Elegy projected in a darkened room, I walked around carrying a cloth bag containing chicken bones, while reading my text about the spate of mass bird-flock deaths. I invited each participant to take a bone, to examine it, and to reflect on the feelings that arose in them in relation to their experience with the bone while listening to the monologue and viewing the artwork. Afterwards, a visibly moved participant commented that he had experienced a new and deep empathy for “these creatures whom I’ve eaten hundreds of times without ever really thinking about them.” He was moved to reconsider his relationship with these ecological others, to extend grievability to them, and more broadly to see this as an entry point into action on behalf of the future of our biosphere. This moment offers a glimpse at the

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\(^{182}\) I aim to use sustainable, found, reclaimed, and/or biodegradable materials in my art practice.
possibility of ecological artworks creating space for the feeling that more-than-human others matter, which is, according to Freya Mathews, at the heart of environmental ethics.\textsuperscript{183}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image29.png}
\caption{Image 29: Augury: Elegy (2011). Wall Space Gallery, Ottawa ON. Photo credit: Karen Abel.}
\end{figure}

However, to reiterate a point I made above, I do not want to be falsely optimistic about the potential of artworks to change people’s hearts, minds, or behaviours. Perhaps these artworks are simply expressions of my own devastated consciousness, and perhaps they create space for such feelings to be felt; I know that many viewers connected with these works and expressed to me their own experiences of sensitivity and grief. In his introduction to an

\textsuperscript{183} Mathews 2011, 172.
anthology of Canadian nature poems, Don McKay voiced the need for personal change but also the possibility that it is too late to stop the losses we are seeing:

All of us, as citizens of the planet, are called to amend our lives, to live less exploitatively and consumptively. And some, as artists of language – that is, poets – are also called to develop the sense organ that language listens with, to ensure that, as the effects of environmental degradation become more evident in decades to come, it is attending at a deep level. Even if when it moves from listening to speaking, all it can utter is elegy. Even if it is all lament.184

Proleptic elegy did not stop World War Two. Perhaps ecological elegy, awareness, and even activism cannot stop the freight train of consumerism, capitalism, and catastrophic ecological losses. But, like Joanna Macy, I cannot help but hope, to envision and work toward, in my own small ways, a more sustainable, aware, just, and interconnected future; to rest in ignorance or despair would be to collude with injustice and death.

AUGURY : ELEGY Exhibitions

Augury : Elegy, in addition to the other pieces I described above, formed an ‘avian/Icarian apocalypse’ installation, which I exhibited in different configurations at Kingston’s Artel, The Ban Righ Centre at Queen’s, Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre (Kingston), Wall Space Gallery (Ottawa), and UBC Okanagan’s art gallery in 2011-12. The installations also featured two paintings of severed birds’ wings and two actual bird’s wings, placed on discoloured cotton mesh (evoking used surgical bandages or the cheesecloth from food preparation) on small shelves or pedestals, like relics.

In June-July 2011, my work was the centre of a three-person exhibition entitled With This Land, curated by Christine Dewancker, at The Artel. Dewancker’s curatorial statement was as follows:

Our connection with the land that we inhabit is a relationship that has become seemingly disjointed and fragmented, putting humans at the top of a perceived natural hierarchy. We are in dire need of a shift in this perception. Reflected in this show are two attitudes towards the relationship with our environment, both acknowledging the need to re-establish our connection with the Earth and all who inhabit it. Jessica Marion Barr’s installation, Augury : Elegy, displays a solemn reverence for more than 12,000 birds that fell from the sky in early 2011. Her work reflects the kind of catastrophe that can occur when we forget that this world is shared, and this tragedy can be understood as a warning about our increasingly toxic impact on the world and the potentially dire consequences of maintaining the status quo. Accompanying Barr’s work are artists Heather Smith and Lianne Suggitt. Both Smith and Suggitt’s work acknowledges a respectful relationship with the land and illustrates the necessity of living in connection with our environment. Images of hunters and farm landscapes are supplemented with portraits of the wild life that share these spaces, and are presented here in an illustration of balance and understanding rather than misuse and disrespect.185

Image 30: Augury : Elegy installation in With This Land exhibition at The Artel, Kingston, ON (2011)

Around the same time, Augury : Elegy was selected for inclusion in Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre’s annual members’ exhibition, which ran from August to September, 2011. The exhibition was curated by Iga Janik, who called it The Rough Edge of Beauty, and selected works that “expose some of the rough edges that surround us… revealing the darker parts of our common experience”; about my piece, she wrote:

Jessica Marion Barr’s *Augury : Elegy* is an installation comprised of chicken bones and branches. While striking in a sad and lonely kind of way it brings beauty back to life in how delicate it feels, almost lace-like in its composition. Spending time with the work the long gone lives of animals linger in the air but the audacity of the artist to work so freely with these small pieces of carcasses brings us back to our impact on the environment, our habits of consumption, and our inevitable reaction to things we may not like to face so easily.186


In the fall of 2011, I was invited to display my work at the Ban Righ Centre at Queen’s University; their programming in 2011-12 was based around environmental themes. The installation included *Augury : Elegy, Fall*, the birds’ nest drawings, and some smaller found object assemblages on similar themes. The work was displayed in January-February 2012,

culminating in a well-attended talk I gave on February 28, entitled “Birds, Bees, Bones: Can Art Save the World?”

My work was also noticed by Cynthia Mykytyshyn, a Queen’s Cultural Studies M.A. student, who included Augury: Elegy and the found wings in her curatorial project Where the Wild Things... Aren’t? at Wall Space Gallery, Ottawa in April 2012. Her curatorial statement acknowledges her debt to William Cronon’s seminal text “The Trouble with Wilderness”:

*Where the Wild Things... Aren’t?*, an environmental art exhibition at Wall Space Gallery, Ottawa, takes its inspiration from a passage by scholar and environmental theorist William Cronon, who writes:

“This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings...then also by

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187 The talk ended with a participatory art intervention: using Yoko Ono’s *Wish Tree* instructions as a starting point, I invited participants to write their ‘ecological wish’ on a strip of (biodegradable) newsprint, and then to collectively find a tree on whose branches they tied their wishes. The wishes were then left to biodegrade, looking like ghostly birds flapping their delicate grey wings gently in the wind. Queen’s Art Professor and sculptor Ted Rettig praised the presentation in an e-mail message later that day: “Your presentation today was excellent! I did learn a lot and I heard the urgent, engaged voice of a younger generation that, despite the hopelessness we all face, has much important energy to offer, is a joy to hear, and that gives me much hope (if it is not all too late)” (Feb. 28, 2012).
definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like.”

As a graduate student of Cultural Studies at Queen’s University, a great deal of my studies were spent pondering Cronon’s assertion and its significance to contemporary thinking about the environment. Can Cronon’s paradox be overcome? Can this idea of a ‘nature out there’ be undone as Cronon seems to suggest it ought? The decision to curate an environmental art show was an ideal opportunity to explore issues related to art and the environment in greater depth. This group exhibition takes up those preceding questions, among others, and explores the human relationship to the thing we call ‘nature’. In an atmosphere of reflective dialogue, artists question and confront assumptions of a relationship often taken for granted. The intent is not to condemn or to prescribe solutions, but to encourage individuals to not only engage imaginatively with the works, but also to question personal attitudes and behaviours.

The decision to curate an environmental art show was an ideal opportunity to explore issues related to art and the environment in greater depth. This group exhibition takes up those preceding questions, among others, and explores the human relationship to the thing we call ‘nature’. In an atmosphere of reflective dialogue, artists question and confront assumptions of a relationship often taken for granted. The intent is not to condemn or to prescribe solutions, but to encourage individuals to not only engage imaginatively with the works, but also to question personal attitudes and behaviours.

The title, “Where the Wild Things…Aren’t?” is the ideal place to begin examining the central themes underpinning this exhibition. The phrasing introduces several assumptions which become suspect and questions the following with emphatic punctuation: the assumption that “wild” can and does exist somewhere (even if it is not here); the assumption, and inherent objectification, of the ‘other-than-human’ as “things”; and the socially constructed assumption of a ‘human’ space that is supposedly separate from where the “wild things” might be. The title is also derived from that of the children's book and more recent film, Where the Wild Things Are. This story deals with the ‘wild’ aspects of human psychology, qualities that make us like ‘nature’.

The show is organized along an inverse “?” form, beginning at the front entrance-way. The works are positioned according to thematic similarities. ‘Nature’ is lost, lamented, sought after, and ultimately found anew. I see this as representing the inherent themes of the exhibition, as we strive to comes to terms with our relationship to that thing we call ‘nature’.

The show can be read as a struggle to understand how we feel both connected to and alienated from the other-than-human. The works in this exhibition are united by the common sentiments of frustration, grief, longing, compassion, empathy… Each artist, in his or her own way, seeks to demonstrate that we are intimately connected to the ‘natural’ world, yet this connection is fraught, conflicted, uncertain, painful, at times both familiar and unfamiliar. No answers are given, but many questions are illuminated in this visual exploration.

[...]

Jessica Marion Barr
Augury : Elegy [...]

Barr’s work is a powerful and hauntingly beautiful display of human mourning. A laborious construction (a self-proclaimed non-meat-eater, Barr collected and meticulously cleaned the remnant bones from ‘leftover’ grocery store rotisserie
chickens) her bone ‘shower’ makes use of abject associations with bones and flesh to lay bare the reality of death. Barr’s Augury: Elegy converses with Karen Abel’s Hibernaculum rather successfully in this exhibition: both are reminiscent of catacombs and ossuaries (burial grounds characterized by exposed human remains), although Barr’s much more literally than Abel’s in that Barr uses ‘authentic’ bird bones—undisguised, Barr presents death, or at least its product. In preserving and showcasing the remains in this way, she memorializes the loss of the other-than-human, and provides an opportunity to mourn. Important questions then arise around who is deserving of cathartic demonstrations of grief. While the preservation and respectful handling of human remains is quite common, the honoring of the other-than-human is arguably far less so. Barr challenges this division in this work. Barr’s drive to act ethically and responsibly toward the other-than-human infuses her work with lamentation for a mistreatment we currently accept as normal; a sense of mourning pervades the collection and provokes an emotional response—the delicacy of the work, each bone gently tied with repurposed thread, the birds wings wrapped in linen, gently preserved, suggests hers was a labor of respect and compassion. Something about the use of living (or once living) tissue has both a repulsive yet oddly tender quality. The repetitive quality of Barr’s labour also recalls a meditative, or prayer-like encounter, as though the process itself, and the handling of the materials, provides an outlet for grief. 

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In August 2012 I travelled to Kelowna, BC, to give a presentation about my work (I mentioned this above) and participate in an art exhibition for the biannual conference of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC). With a giant red suitcase containing Augury : Elegy in tow, I boarded VIA Rail’s flagship train The Canadian for a round trip train voyage to British Columbia and back, thinking it both the most ecologically responsible way to travel (although I’ve since realized that was not in fact the case), and an exciting way to see much of the country. Four long days later, after transferring my bulky luggage to a Greyhound bus from Kamloops to Kelowna, I installed my work in the FINA Gallery at UBC Okanagan. The work was very well received, as was my performative, relational conference presentation, which was considered to be a conference highlight; in fact, poet John
Lent was so moved that he dedicated a poem (about a dead bird) to me at the conference’s closing banquet.
Image 36: Augury : Elegy installation (details) at FINA Gallery (UBC Okanagan) (2012)
Chapter 6: 
INDICATOR

In the course of my research, I began thinking more about indicator species. As I mentioned above, birds are important indicator species, as are bees. I had been aware of colony collapse disorder (CCD)\textsuperscript{189} and the threat posed by neonicotinoid pesticides for some time, and I began to form an idea of an exhibition that I would call *Indicator*, marrying my work with other artists’ works addressing indicator species in decline. Some years before, my colleague and art school friend Gareth Bate (whose performance video *Penance [for Environmental Destruction]*\textsuperscript{190} was included in *Where the Wild Things... Aren’t?*) had done a compelling mural depicting the Roman Coliseum in liquid honey; he called it *Colony Collapse*, referencing both CCD as well as the Roman Empire (the repeating arches of the Coliseum evoking the cells of a honeycomb), implying that the fall of the bees might augur the fall of the contemporary (Euro-American) ‘empire.’ In his artist statement, Bate quoted Lord Byron: “While stands the

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image37.png}
\caption{Gareth Bate, *Colony Collapse* (detail) (2008). Photo credit: Gareth Bate.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{189} See http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1348211/colony-collapse-disorder-CCD for an overview. 
Coliseum, / Rome shall stand: / When falls the Coliseum, Rome / shall fall: / And when Rome falls – the World.”

I knew that an expanded version of this piece would be an essential part of the exhibition, drawn on the walls of an exhibition space to encircle and enclose the other works like a Coliseum or hive.

I was also interested in including Karen Abel’s *Hibernaculum*, which had been featured in dialogue with *Augury: Elegy* in the Wall Space exhibition, as Mykytyskyn’s curatorial statement explains above. Abel, an artist and trained naturalist, initially created *Hibernaculum* in April 2012 for Earth Day and International Year of the Bat. Like Bate, Abel too references the fall of an empire in her artist statement, quoting Richard Le Gallienne’s *Spring In The Paris*

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Catacombs (1913): “An empire gone where all empires must go / Melting away as simply as the snow.” Abel’s artist statement eloquently and elegiacally explains this project:

*Hibernaculum* consists of a metal sculpture constructed with parts salvaged from three vintage chandeliers. Hanging cast sugar bat sculptures and strings of cast sugar beads replace the fixtures’ original decorative crystal prisms, creating an intricate biological structure that references the cluster formations of cave-hibernating bats.

During winter hibernation, cave-dwelling bats conserve energy by entering a state of reduced physiological activity called torpor. Their body temperature is lowered to match the cave climate, which causes beads of condensation to form on their fur, often resulting in a glistening, jewel-like appearance as they hang from the walls and ceilings of caves and abandoned mines. Like crystal chandeliers suspended in a great hall, the winter-long slumber of hibernating bat colonies is a silent reminder that bats are a significant and fragile element of cave ecology.

With each iteration of *Hibernaculum*, the crystalline structure of hibernating bats is expanded in size to reference the slow formation of a cave stalactite – a natural mineral deposit that hangs from the ceiling of a cave. Much like the ecology of caves that bats rely on for their winter habitat, stalactites take centuries to develop and can be forever changed by a single disturbance.

Throughout human history, bats have been threatened due to misinformation and myths. Now, the world’s only flying mammal (and longest-living small mammal) is facing what is possibly the greatest danger imaginable. The sugar sculptures reference *Myotis lucifugus* [little brown bat], one of three Ontario bat species listed as endangered in 2012 due to the emergence of a fatal disease caused by a non-native white fungus invading cave habitats across North America. Claiming millions of hibernating bats in the U.S. and Canada since 2006, the impact of the disease, called White-nose Syndrome, has been described as the most sudden and unforeseen wildlife decline in living memory. Despite committed research, scientists have struggled to uncover definitive answers that could lead to treatment or a cure. In the absence of scientific understanding, *Hibernaculum* attempts to illuminate a mysterious wildlife epidemic obscured in the darkness of hibernation.

In response to the unprecedented impacts of the disease on North America’s bat populations, the United Nations Environment Programme declared 2011-2012 International Year of the Bat. *Hibernaculum* was created in observation of the two-year global species awareness initiative.

Adding another layer to the work, as the cast-sugar pieces are exposed to the moisture in the air, the sugar slowly crystallizes, transforming the pieces from their transparent, glass-like state to an

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193 Ibid.
opaque white. This transformation starts at the bottom of each piece (the bat’s nose) – uncannily echoing the fungal effect of White-nose Syndrome on little brown bats.

Birds, bees, and bats. I approached Abel and Bate in January 2013; they were both impressed with the idea and agreed to be part of Indicator. Bate’s subterranean studio at Toronto’s 401 Richmond arts building (a factory converted into artists’ studios) was an ideal setting to create the intimate, cave-like atmosphere I envisioned for the exhibition. I also began researching and working on my first-ever sound installation – combining field recordings of European honeybees, little brown bats, and most of the bird species in the flock deaths that inspired Augury: Elegy (grackles, redwing blackbirds, robins, starlings, brown-headed cowbirds, American coots, and turtle doves) as well as the calls of threatened Ontario birds (least bittern, barn swallow, olive-sided flycatcher, yellow-breasted chat) into a sonic palimpsest that rises and falls in intensity, from soothing birdsong to a disturbing avian cacophony. In keeping with the exhibition’s theme, I called the piece Indications.¹⁹⁴

The timing was right for an application to Toronto’s Nuit Blanche, in particular “Exhibition Area C: Romancing the Anthropocene,” described by curators Ivan Jurakic and Crystal Mowry as follows:

The Anthropocene, or age of man, has recently been proposed as a name to represent the geological era that we are currently living in. Beginning with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, it is a period in which humanity has left an indelible and perhaps permanent mark on the global ecosystem. At face value, it acknowledges the triumph of science and human achievement but also bares a cautionary message regarding climate change, the destruction of natural habitat, resource depletion, and the mass extinction of plant and animal species. Using the Anthropocene as a guiding principle, we wish to explore the fabric of the city through the lens of an environment in a state of perpetual change and crisis.¹⁹⁵

This theme fit perfectly with *Indicator*, so I applied and received an acceptance – *Indicator* would be an official *Nuit Blanche* independent project, as well as an official part of the 401 Richmond’s *Built for Art* programming. In late September 2013, Abel, Bate, and I worked for a week to transform Bate’s messy, paint-smeared studio into a pristine white exhibition space before installing our works. Abel re-cast and added additional sugar components and re-wired the chandelier before installing *Hibenaculum*; Bate did research and planning to create a multi-wall mural and then worked all night to execute it the night before *Nuit Blanche* (drawing freehand with liquid honey); in addition to making and installing *Indications*, I strung up more chicken bones to expand *Augury : Elegy* further into the gallery space, making it a more dynamic intervention that reached out to viewers, rather than a static sculpture to be viewed passively. Abel and I carefully installed lighting that illuminated the artworks while preserving a warm, cave-like atmosphere, giving the space a dim glow, as opposed to the harsh brightness of a gallery.

Images 39 & 40: *Indicator* catalogue image (Karen Abel design) and preparing more bones
I wrote the following curatorial statement for the project, with input from Abel, whose training as a naturalist meant that our uses of scientific terminology were accurate (the text also uses, with their permission, excerpts from Abel and Bate’s previous artist statements):

Birds, bats, bees. Indicator species signal the deteriorated state of ecosystems, warning us when our environs are in trouble. Three elegiac installations investigate the concept of biological indicators and the suffering of wildlife due to habitat destruction, climate change, and environmental contamination. A rain cloud of bird bones and a chandelier inhabited by crystalline cast-sugar bats float in the gallery space, encircled by a ghostly amphitheatre-like wall mural of the ancient Roman Coliseum hand drawn with liquid honey. A sound installation layering the calls and sounds of these animals pervades the ecological arena. Visitors are embedded and implicated in the disastrous results of the global incursion of human ‘empire,’ as manifested in our ailing ‘indicator’ species.

Karen Abel’s *Hibernaculum* is a sculpture constructed from five salvaged chandeliers. Hanging cast sugar bat sculptures replace the fixtures’ original decorative crystal prisms, creating an intricate biological structure that references the cluster formations of cave-hibernating bats. With each iteration, the sugar structure is expanded in size to reference the slow formation of a cave stalactite, which, like the ecology of the caves that bats rely on for their winter habitat, take centuries to develop and can be forever changed by a single disturbance. The hibernating bat sculptures reference *Myotis lucifugus*, an Ontario bat species listed as endangered due to the emergence of a fatal disease [White-nose Syndrome] invading cave habitats across North America. Claiming an estimated 7 million bats, the impact has been described as the most sudden and unforeseen wildlife decline in living memory. In the absence of scientific understanding, *Hibernaculum* attempts to illuminate a mysterious wildlife disease obscured in the darkness of hibernation.

Augury refers to omens, from the ancient Roman tradition of interpreting birds’ behaviour and bones as signs of divine judgement. Jessica Marion Barr’s *Augury : Elegy* addresses a seemingly apocalyptic spate of bird-flock deaths that began on New Year’s Eve 2011 in Arkansas, when 4,000 blackbirds fell out of the sky, dead. In the days that followed, dozens of similar incidents occurred. BirdLife International states: “Birds are crucial indicators of ecosystem health. Changes in bird populations signal changes in the ecosystems we depend on for food, clean air, and water.” The warnings are everywhere, if only we would choose to see them – because those were a lot of canaries, and we’re all in this coal mine together. The visceral, elegiac confrontation with the bird bones (salvaged from food preparation) in the piece reminds viewers that we are all implicated in potentially catastrophic climate change.

Gareth Bate’s *Colony Collapse* is an image of the Roman Coliseum hand drawn on the walls of the exhibition space in liquid honey, whose drips echo the architecture of this icon, creating an analogy between the fall of the Roman Empire and the precariousness of our own civilization, as bee populations (whose
roles as pollinators sustain our food supply) dwindle due to Colony Collapse Disorder. Researchers estimate that nearly one-third of all honeybee colonies in the U.S. have vanished. Bate writes: “In perilous times, this installation represents a sense of fragility and interconnectedness. We seem to operate under the strange idea that culture is separate from nature, as opposed to being a manifestation of it.”

Indicator brings these three powerful pieces together with a unique sonic palimpsest to create an immersive meditation on our relationship with our environing world, and to suggest that we heed the messages these species are sending us.196

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196 This text was printed on posters that viewers could read before entering or leaving the space, and we also printed a number of smaller versions that viewers took with them. We also had a stack of handouts about CCD from a local beekeepers’ collective – they had all been taken by the end of the night. All materials were printed on recycled paper. View more images of Indicator at [www.garethbate.com/artwork_pages/indicator_exhibition_menu.html](http://www.garethbate.com/artwork_pages/indicator_exhibition_menu.html) (accessed Aug. 10, 2015).
Image 44: *Indicator – Augury: Elegy with Colony Collapse*. Photo credit: Gareth Bate.

Image 47: *Indicator – Colony Collapse*. Photo credit: Gareth Bate.

Image 48: *Indicator – Colony Collapse with Augury: Elegy*. Photo credit: Gareth Bate.

Selected as one of 10 “not-to-be-missed” projects by NOW Magazine\textsuperscript{197} and featured on CBC News the night before \textit{Nuit Blanche},\textsuperscript{198} \textit{Indicator} had a constant stream of appreciative guests who followed the sounds of \textit{Indications} down the eerie basement halls of the 401 Richmond. One of the many positive comments in \textit{Indicator}’s guest book was as follows: “KUDOS on the anti-irrelevant subject matter! I wish the rest of tonight’s Art weren’t so easily whupped by y’all on that question….,” (anonymous). The dynamism of the expanded \textit{Augury : Elegy} (the subtle movements of the bones due to the movements of air from passersby and drafts) also caught the attention of a journalist from local magazine \textit{The Grid}, and the piece was included in an online review entitled “\textit{Nuit Blanche Animated},” which featured GIFs of nine


\textsuperscript{198} See my interview with CBC News as part of their pre-\textit{Nuit Blanche} coverage at http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/Toronto/ID/2410497201/, starting at 0:35 seconds (accessed June 13, 2015 – unfortunately this video may have been removed from the CBC website since I accessed it).
projects, including a close-up of the bones in Augury: Elegy slowly turning. The review described the project as “Environmental disaster meets elegance”:

A three-part piece accented with activism, these works all dealt with how “indicator” species react when we trouble the earth. Hibernaculum was built from five salvaged chandeliers, with the hanging cast sugar bats representing an endangered species; Colony Collapse featured the Roman Coliseum drawn in liquid honey on the walls (and, by the way, aren’t bees in trouble?); and Augury: Elegy was an eerie mobile of bird bones and skeletal systems inspired by the 4,000 dead blackbirds that fell out of the Arkansas sky in 2011. With sticky floors alluding to the sticky situation we find ourselves in on our planet, this installation hit the sweet spot.

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200 Ibid.
As the reviewer above mentioned, an (unforeseen) addition to the aesthetic and immersiveness of the project was the outcome of honey meeting hundreds of shoes over the course of the night. Bate’s murals dripped onto the floors, creating puddles of honey which grew larger as the night progressed and the honey continued to flow down the walls (the honey also added an olfactory aspect to the experience – many viewers commented on the particular smell of the honey – sweet but musty – as well as the slight odor of stale cooked chicken flesh that Augury: Elegy emits). We assumed that visitors would step around these puddles, but inevitably people stepped into the puddles (the space was small and the crowds were at times fairly large); their sticky feet then left dirty footprints on the white floor, which became increasingly grey as the evening progressed, leaving halos of white around the bases of the two hanging pieces as well as the edges of most of the honey puddles. This had the interesting effect of creating traces of the people who had experienced the exhibition, almost like the tracks of animals in snow – a sticky, dirty map of the choreography of the night.


Yes, one or two viewers did attempt to lick the honey on the walls.


Image 60: *Indicator – Colony Collapse* and *Hibernaculum* and footprints. Photo credit: Gareth Bate.
Indicator was the culmination of my “Auguries of Elegy” work, with Indications adding a sonic layer to this elegiac project. The sound installation is more than field recordings or “nature sounds” – at its most intense, it is both a resistant and disturbing protest, and an echo of Angelucci’s A Mourning Chorus in its keening lament for species at risk due to human activity. At seven months pregnant, I found the preparation for this project, as well as the all-night activity of Nuit Blanche particularly exhausting (by around 2 a.m. I had such severe hip pain that I couldn’t stand or walk for more than a few moments), but I was glad to have seized the opportunity to reach the huge audience202 provided by the Nuit Blanche affiliation; discussing the work and its subject matter with a wide range of interested visitors made the experience even more meaningful.

202 According to the CBC News report that featured Indicator, over 1.5 million visitors were expected for Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2013 (http://www.cbc.ca/player/News/Canada/Toronto/ID/2410497201/).
Chapter 7: NATIONAL ELEGY

As if attempting some kind of art biathlon as an endurance test for my pregnant body, five days after Nuit Blanche, I did a three-hour rooftop installation performance of a piece entitled National Elegy on the opening night of The Annual at Toronto’s Gladstone Hotel.

I had the idea for the piece in 2012, after a storm on Lake Simcoe (where my adopted grandfather built a small cottage in the 1950s) damaged our family canoe. The canoe had ended up on a neighbour’s beach, and, with my mother’s permission, the neighbours cut the canoe in half in anticipation of taking it to the dump. However, seeing the canoe in pieces filled both my mother and me with grief and regret, so we kept the two pieces, thinking that we might keep them to remember “Poppy” – my mother’s adopted father Fred Dawes, to whom the canoe had belonged. We considered making the halves into planters or bookshelves, but then I was struck with the notion of weaving the canoe back together with strips of white fabric, evoking bandages or surgical gauze. The two halves of the red canoe, joined by white fabric (which I tore from white bedsheets) in the middle, instantly reminded me of the Canadian flag, and I began to think about the connections between the personal aspects of this piece and the larger socio-political context surrounding its origins.

Since meeting my partner (who holds a B.A. in Indigenous Studies) and beginning my graduate studies at Queen’s in 2010, I have become increasingly aware of and invested in issues of Indigenous history, sovereignty, and decolonization. As a Toronto-born settler of mixed European ancestry, I have committed myself to re-learning the history of Turtle Island, to

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203 Just as I was finishing the draft of this text I learned that my grandmother’s grandmother was Indigenous, from Six Nations (specifically a community between Marshville and Welland Ontario, which was most likely Cayuga), but I know better than to claim any indigeneity based on a 1/16 connection.
decolonizing my mind, and to finding ways to work toward Indigenous sovereignty and nation-to-nation relations. I was active in Toronto’s Idle No More activities in 2012-2013, attending every round dance, rally, and teach-in I heard about. In the winter of 2013 I took an online course taught by Jean-Paul Restoule (Dokis First Nation, an instructor at OISE) entitled “Aboriginal Worldviews and Education” in an attempt to deepen my understanding of Indigenous issues. I have also assisted my partner in his work with Turtle Island Conservation, running Traditional Ecological Knowledge conservation activities for young people in First Nations communities in southern Ontario. So I was aware that making a piece that addressed both a canoe (as an Indigenous cultural item and symbol that has been largely co-opted by Canadian settler “cottage” or outdoor culture) and the Canadian flag was politically loaded. Added to this was the fairly complex situation of indigeneity in my own family, which is further complicated by the fact that my mother was adopted by Fred and Marion Dawes at birth, so my mother and I have no blood connection to this part of the family. As far as we can tell, Fred Dawes’s paternal grandparents were at least partly Indigenous (their nation[s] are unknown to us as this sort of information was typically expunged from family trees), and the friend who gifted the canoe to Fred was also Indigenous (but again, his nation is also unknown to us; a sad ending to this part of the story is that this friend later committed suicide). While I did not initially conceive of National Elegy as an attempt to decolonize my art practice, as I worked on the piece I realized that the canoe itself, and the artwork I was planning to make out of it, were both connected to Indigenous stories. I know better than to claim to be speaking for Indigenous people, and I would never claim to be an expert on Indigenous issues, but I believe that it is vitally important for all Canadians to begin to think, feel, and communicate about these issues.
I submitted a proposal to the Oakville museum’s World of Threads Festival annual textile exhibition (November 2-18, 2012), curated by Dawne Rudman and Gareth Bate, and *National Elegy* was selected to be part of the Outdoor Environmental Installations portion of the festival, at the Queen Elizabeth Park Community and Cultural Centre (at the base of a Canadian flag, appropriately). My mother Janice Lillian Barr and I installed the piece on a frigid, windy late October day, and as my numbed fingers wove the strips of white cotton through the holes I had drilled into the edges of the cut in the canoe and then sewed a maple leaf in the centre using torn strips of red fabric (from an old pillow case sourced at the Salvation Army), with the occasional passer-by slowing to watch me work, I realized that the weaving itself was part of the piece, and could be included in a future iteration as a more deliberate performance.

Image 61: Installing *National Elegy* at the World of Threads Festival (Friday, October 26, 2013), Queen Elizabeth Park Community and Cultural Centre, Oakville, ON. Photo credit: Janice L. Barr.
So I submitted the piece to an exhibition at The Gladstone Hotel, and curator Katherine Dennis selected *National Elegy* to fit with the theme of “Shifting Ground” she had chosen for that year’s iteration of *The Annual* (Oct 10 to Oct 13, 2013):

The tension inherent in change exposes uncertainties and trepidation as well as possibilities and hopefulness found at junctures of transformation. While the ground presupposes the solid surface of the earth, safely positioned below our feet, this, like all things, moves and morphs, often without warning, restructuring the very foundation on which we build. [...] Like physical change, conceptual alterations result in innovation and unease. Both types of continuous flux provide platforms for artistic experimentation and production. By examining the effects of important personal, cultural and societal changes, this exhibit illuminates the threads that bridge distinct reshaping of worlds. Participating artists responded to this year’s theme by thinking literally—natural disasters, urban development,
border negotiations—and metaphorically—reinvention, disruption, the creation of new worlds. Their eclectic responses consider topics ranging from the micro- to macrocosmic; the deeply personal to widely public; and the philosophical to the technological.\textsuperscript{204}

In my proposal for the exhibition, I stated that “I hope that this piece evokes the ‘shifting ground’ of current relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and nations, and conveys a sense of the possibility of ‘the creation of new [and better] worlds’ while acknowledging and learning from the destructive mistakes of Canada’s past.” I also proposed the installation as a performance, which Dennis enthusiastically endorsed, and publicized as: “Live roof-top performance by Jessica Marion Barr throughout the opening. Visible from various stair-case and second floor windows, Jessica will weave together her National Elegy.”\textsuperscript{205} I approached the performance with a feeling of solemnity and melancholy, dressed in black with a red wool coat, perhaps evoking a colonial British army uniform. I climbed over the fire escape fence onto the Gladstone Hotel’s green roof, and with my seven-month pregnant belly visible under the coat, I reflected on what it means for me as a Toronto-born settler to be bringing another settler life into this land. Will my baby grow up to be an ally, working toward decolonization and social and environmental justice, understanding that these are all deeply interconnected? With a sometimes aching back, I bent over the canoe for three hours, slowly untangling and pulling the white strips of thread back and forth from one half of the canoe to the other. I experienced feelings of loss and grief, but also a sense of nurturing and care in my handling of the materials and my intention to reconnect the severed parts.


\textsuperscript{205} Katherine Dennis, \textit{The Annual: Shifting Ground} Facebook event page, October 8, 2013, https://www.facebook.com/events/317189298426105.
In many ways, I believe that *National Elegy* was an act of “melancholizing” in the sense that Flatley describes (which I have already quote above): “the melancholic concern with loss creates the mediating structure that enables a slogan – ‘The personal is political’ – to become a historical-aesthetic methodology. This methodology’s questions are: Whence these losses to which I have become attached? What social structures, discourses, institutions, process have been at work in taking something valuable away from me? With whom do I share these losses or losses like them? What are the historical processes in which this moment of loss participates…?”

My artist statement for *National Elegy* attempts to communicate the complexity and interconnectedness of the issues this piece addresses, from the personal to the political, from the socio-cultural to the ecological:

My adopted grandfather’s canoe was recently damaged in a thunderstorm on Lake Simcoe, where he built a small cottage in the 1950s. With its white strips of fabric evoking bandages or surgical gauze, this piece is an attempt to weave this family heirloom back together. The story of the canoe goes deeper, however. It was gifted to my part-Indigenous, part-English grandfather, Frederick W. Dawes, by an Indigenous friend of his. While the canoe has been largely co-opted by Canadian settler notions of colonial national identity and “the great outdoors,” it was originally an important feature of many Indigenous cultures. In this piece the canoe’s destruction gestures to the devastation of Indigenous peoples in the creation of the nation of Canada, symbolized by the Canadian flag, whose colours are evoked by the weathered red of the canoe and the ghostly white of the torn fabric. So while this piece began as a very personal elegy (a lamentation) for my grandfather’s canoe, it has become an expression of my much greater sadness, contrition, and protest against Canada’s forcible severing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis from their traditional homelands and sustainable cultural-ecological practices – the effects of which are still being felt. Inspired and humbled by the Idle No More movement, I hope that this piece evokes the “shifting ground” of current relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and nations, and inspires a sense of the possibility of “the creation of new [and better] worlds” while acknowledging, mourning for, and learning from the destructive mistakes of Canada’s past.

*National Elegy* is a metaphorical and political gesture of resistant, melancholic mourning, one that attempts to (begin to) articulate visually my grief about the founding and growth of the...

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nation of Canada as an act of ongoing genocide of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. The piece and performance elegize the broken relationship between First Nations and the Canadian state; cultures, families, and individuals broken and severed from their traditions by residential schools and other genocidal policies; the removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and the abuse of those lands (and the other-than-human species who make their homes there) for industrial and commercial purposes. At the same time, the act of weaving the severed parts back together is an act of healing, potential reconciliation. As the Guswenta or Two Row Wampum indicates, it is possible for Indigenous and settler cultures to co-exist in peace, respect, and friendship in the vast space on Turtle Island, as long as we stay in our respective vessels and do not interfere with or damage the other’s ways of being.\textsuperscript{207} In an interesting coincidence, 2013 – the year that I created \textit{National Elegy} – was the 400\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the Two Row Wampum covenant.

The two iterations of the piece were slightly different: in the Oakville version I included a red maple leaf in the centre of the white weaving, with long pieces of red fabric ‘bleeding’ from the leaf onto the ground; in its second iteration I did not sew the maple leaf on but left placed it on the ground behind the white fabric as a more subtle reference. I felt that the prominent ‘bleeding maple leaf’ seemed like too obvious a statement for the audience and venue of \textit{The Annual}; however at the (very colonially named) Queen Elizabeth Park Community and Cultural Centre where the piece was first shown (at the base of a Canadian flag no less!), the iconography

\textsuperscript{207} \textit{The Two Row Wampum belt is the symbolic record of the first agreement between Europeans and American Indian Nations on Turtle Island/North America. 2013 mark[ed] the 400th anniversary of this first covenant, which forms the basis for the covenant chain of all subsequent treaty relationships made by the Haudenosaunee and other Native Nations with settler governments on this continent. The agreement outlines a mutual, three-part commitment to friendship, peace between peoples, and living in parallel forever (as long as the grass is green, as long as the rivers flow downhill and as long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west). Throughout the years, the Haudenosaunee have sought to honor this mutual vision and have increasingly emphasized that \textit{ecological stewardship is a fundamental prerequisite for this continuing friendship}” (Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, “Two Row History,” \textit{Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign}, http://honorthetworow.org/learn-more/history/, italics added).}
and more overt messaging seemed important, as many viewers would be experiencing the piece more casually (on their way to or from a fitness class, picking up a child, etc.) and would likely not take the time to reflect on the piece or read the artist statement. I did not want the piece to be read as a sentimental and patriotic re-imagining of the Canadian flag.
Chapter 8: 1,000 FLYERS

Overlapping both Indicator and National Elegy was work in progress that I call 1,000 Flyers. A participatory project that is simultaneously an act of melancholizing and a ritual aimed at healing, 1,000 Flyers had its genesis in my lament over the junk mail (flyers) that kept piling up on the porch of our shared rental house. At one point there was so much paper that I thought to myself, “There must be at least 1,000 pages,” which then inspired the thought that “I could fold 1,000 paper cranes with all of this paper” (bringing to mind the story of Sadako Sasaki [January 7, 1943 - October 25, 1955], a Japanese girl who, after developing leukemia due to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, began the ritual of folding 1,000 paper cranes – a senbazuru – as a wish for her own healing in accordance with Japanese custom; when she realized she was going to die she changed the intention of her folding to a wish for peace). Cranes brought to mind whooping cranes – a particularly visible endangered bird. I then wondered how many birds species were endangered globally – could there be 1,000? According to the “Red List” of threatened species published by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and BirdLife International, there are over 1,300 bird species at risk of extinction worldwide. So I decided that I would use the flyers to create a senbazuru for these endangered “flyers” – one paper crane for each species at risk of extinction. When I recently asked a group of University of Toronto women’s studies students who were participating in the project why the junk mail is an

\[208\] At the time that I downloaded the list from the IUCN, there were 1,317 bird species listed as either vulnerable, endangered, critically endangered, or extinct in the wild (http://www.iucnredlist.org/search/link/50a68822-19f1bf57, accessed November 16, 2012). See also Alanna Mitchell’s compelling and thorough article “The 1,300 Bird Species Facing Extinction Signal Threats to Human Health,” National Geographic online, August 26, 2014, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140825-bird-environment-chemical-contaminant-climate-change-science-winged-warning. Furthermore, while birds are not as threatened as, for example, amphibians, the Center for Biological Diversity writes that “Birds occur in nearly every habitat on the planet and are often the most visible and familiar wildlife to people across the globe. As such, they provide an important bellwether for tracking changes to the biosphere. Declining bird populations across most to all habitats confirm that profound changes are occurring on our planet in response to human activities” (“The Extinction Crisis,” http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/).
important part of the project, several of them made the connections immediately: firstly, the ads
may be printed on paper that comes from trees which provided important habitat for many bird
species. Secondly, the consumer goods and food advertised in the flyers are part of a larger
problem of overconsumption, resource extraction, industrial agriculture, and other habitat-
destroying, ecosystem-toxifying issues that are causing species loss, not to mention endangering
multitudes of human lives. And by re-using the unwanted flyers, I am ensuring that no new
products are consumed in the process of making the memorial paper cranes. In this project, the
material is part of the message.

I downloaded an alphabetized list of all 1,317 threatened and endangered bird species
from the IUCN’s Red List website; I then formatted and printed the list (on recycled paper) so
that as each bird species was honoured with a paper crane, they could be marked off the list. I
soon realized that a faceless list of Latin and English names was not a very compelling or
respectful way to consider all of these bird species, so I decided to compile a visual list. It took
me at least a week of Internet searching to find pictures of all of the bird species on the list,
which resulted in a 219-page document (again, printed on recycled paper). I started at the
beginning of the alphabet, and over the course of a few weeks I folded around 200 cranes (saying
a small prayer as I folded each one, as my step-mother Keiko Hayahara had taught me in
accordance with her understanding of the tradition of the senbazuru; my prayer was: “Dear
[species name] – may you thrive for another 1,000 years and more; I pray for you, and I pledge
to help”); I found that the variation in the junk mail meant that I could make each crane evoke its
species in a small way through my choice of colour and size. After I finished folding each crane,
I wrote the species’ name on its wing and marked it off the list.
I first shared this project on Earth Day 2013 at the Masaryk-Cowan Community Centre in Toronto’s Parkdale neighbourhood, in conjunction with Greenest City Environmental Organization (who are housed in the community centre and arranged the room bookings for me). I set up a table with the two lists, some books about species loss and endangered birds, and samples of cranes that I had already folded, in addition to pre-cut squares of junk mail paper and printed instructions for folding origami cranes. I invited participants (ranging in age from around eight to eighty and from diverse backgrounds including Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Portuguese) to look through the binder containing the visual list, to choose a bird species that they felt a kinship with, and then I guided them through folding an origami crane as a wish or prayer for the healing and protection of that species. I provided the text of my prayer or “statement of hope” as an example of what participants might say to the species or hold as an intention in their minds as they were folding their crane. We then wrote the species’ name on the folded bird and added it to the ‘flock.’ The heft and length of my informal encyclopedia of potential extinctions is impactful – participants sometimes commented on feeling overwhelmed by the realization that each picture in this huge list represents a whole species that may soon be
forever lost. Nixon states that the “casualties of slow violence – human and environmental – are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted.”\textsuperscript{209} 1,000 Flyers enumerates, in a way, potential casualties – a sort of portable portrait gallery of imminent and possible deaths. I have since brought this project to the Urban Forests & Political Ecologies Transdisciplinary Conference at Hart House, Toronto (April 18-20, 2013), Voice of Women for Peace youth leadership camp in Waubaushene ON (Aug. 27-30, 2013), Thinking Extinction symposium at Laurentian University in Sudbury, ON (Nov. 14-16, 2013), Astrida Neimanis’s Gender Studies Methodologies class at New College, University of Toronto (March 3 and July 23, 2014), and Toronto Region Conservation Authority’s Tommy Thompson Park Spring Bird Festival (May 9, 2015). Artist Nicole McGrath also brought a small version of the project to a children’s Earth Day activity hosted by the Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve (Lansdowne, ON) in 2014; she sent me the children’s folded cranes, honouring species from the list, to add to the flock.

\textsuperscript{209} Nixon 2011, 13.
The process is slower than I had anticipated as almost every participant needs to be guided through the folding, which takes 10 minutes or so. At present, there are approximately 400 origami cranes, so there is still much of the project to complete. I am also not strict about species being chosen multiple times, so certain bird species (based, I think, on how exciting their pictures look) have been honoured with several cranes. It is the intention that matters; the time

that participants choose to spend carefully folding their crane; the act of parting with their work – leaving it with the rest of the “flock,” contributing in a small way to the visibility of species loss.

The following is the artist statement that I include with the project:

According to BirdLife International, over 1,300 bird species globally are now threatened with extinction. In this work in progress, my intention is to fold origami cranes to commemorate these endangered bird species. I am currently making paper cranes from junk mail that I have collected over the past few months; each crane is dedicated to one species, and I recite a short statement of hope for the healing and thriving of that species as I am folding the crane.

According to my stepmother Keiko Hayahara, in Japanese culture it is believed that creating a senbazuru (a group of 1,000 paper cranes) aids in the healing of an ill person; she has told me that as one is folding each crane, one can say a small prayer or set an intention for the healing of that person – or, in this case, species.

This project is meant to be participatory, so I invite viewers to participate by folding their own paper cranes for the species that remain on the list. Participants will choose a species and say a short statement of hope while folding their crane, and then label that crane with the name of their chosen species. Their bird will then be added to the ‘flock’ – this will eventually form a cloud- or constellation-like installation of paper cranes hanging at various lengths, surrounding and immersing viewer-participants – an ethos of simultaneous mourning and hope pervading the space.

The use of flyers (rather than origami paper) draws attention to the fact that the ads we see and discard so frequently may well be produced from trees which should have been protected habitat for endangered birds. Furthermore, the products advertised in the flyers, and the larger system of consumerism they represent, contribute significantly to pollution, destruction of ecosystems, and other factors that are endangering so many birds and other species (including humans). Finally, the term “flyers” is a play on words, referring both to printed advertisements as well as creatures that fly – an apt title for a project about birds.

The root of the word ‘commemorate’ is the Latin word memorare, ‘relate’, which comes from memor, ‘mindful.’ This relational project is meant to be an opportunity to mindfully, tactilely, and creatively engage with serious environmental problems, while hopefully encouraging a greater sense of interconnection with our ecological kin.

Eventually, I hope to release this flock back into the ‘wild’ by installing it in a tree at a bird sanctuary or conservation centre, where local birds may use the thread and paper for their nests.
In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon argues that we need new ways of representing environmental violence and injustice, giving a visible presence to unseen or neglected “slow” environmental disasters. I have cited Nixon’s questions about such representations above (“How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making…?”).\(^{210}\) Included in the “long emergencies of slow violence”\(^{211}\) are species loss, habitat destruction, and toxic build-up. Much of my recent work attempts to answer Nixon’s questions by representing the often underrepresented “long dyings”\(^{212}\) of species loss, and avian species loss in particular. In offering such imagery, my work also attempts to, in Nixon’s words, “bring emotionally to life” and “render apprehensible to the senses”\(^{213}\) the slow violence of species loss – to make it tangible, tactile, and narratable. And as I have argued above, I believe that resistant, proleptic, elegiac artworks make an important contribution to the “visibilization” of ecological losses. *1,000 Flyers* is a kind of proleptic or resistant elegy; it is an

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\(^{210}\) Nixon 2011, 3.  
\(^{211}\) *Ibid*.  
\(^{212}\) *Ibid*, 2. The full sentence reads “The long dyings – the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war’s toxic after maths or climate change – are underrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory” (2-3).  
attempt to engage participants tactiley and affectively in the ongoing slow violence of species loss, to render it more personal (and potentially actionable). It is simultaneously a subtle act of mourning and an expression of hope that is public, relational, mindful, and creative: in the moments of attention during the choosing of the species, in the slowing down and focus required to fold an origami crane, in the perhaps paradoxical shared wonder, joy, or even humour of learning how to fold the crane, even in the potential sadness or melancholy the process may elicit in participants. This project could be seen as another instance of creative “melancholizing.” Flatley refers to historically situated and shared melancholias as “affective maps.” The over 1,300 paper cranes in this project will be symbolic points on a global affective map of endangered species and other potential slow violence-related losses.

When the project is complete, I intend to “release” the “flock” in an outdoor venue – perhaps hanging from a tree and left to be used by local birds as some bird species use thread and bits of paper in their nest-building. Or, if this option is nixed by conservationists, I might bury the cranes (the flyers are mainly newsprint, which is highly biodegradable), each with the seed of a bird-friendly native plant in its folds, so that the flock might produce a tangible benefit for local birds.
I would like to briefly acknowledge and discuss some potential shortcomings of this project: firstly, I am aware that birds are generally not “invisible” the way other, less charismatic species and classes of animal are, including, of course, invisibilized groups of humans. Indeed, birds are among the more attractive and sympathetic threatened animals. Why not 2,400 Amphibians?\(^{214}\) Perhaps the most obvious reason for my choice is the fact that the senbazuru traditionally uses origami cranes, so birds are a logical choice. And perhaps birds’ attractiveness and relative visibility can be mobilized to, as Nixon writes, “rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention,” “giving the unapparent a materiality upon which we can act.”\(^{215}\)

Another concern I would like to raise is the importance of integrating eco-critical work with decolonization strategies and Indigenous studies. In 1,000 Flyers, the birds are not represented with or within their home ecosystems and interconnections, nor does the project include the relationships between birds and the Indigenous peoples in their places, and the environmental and social justice movements that are happening in those places. As such, the project risks tipping into something of a zoo or menagerie mentality, an exoticized enumeration, or a tokenistic conservationism, rather than a more valuable holistic ecological and Indigenous-centred view, which I believe to be central to effective ecological artwork and justice projects.\(^{216}\)

I have no good justification for these omissions and potentially problematic elements; that said, one art project cannot do everything. Aesthetically, I believe it is important to keep the

\(^{214}\) According to the IUCN’s Red List, 2,396 species of amphibian are currently threatened (http://www.iucnredlist.org/search, accessed June 26, 2015). “No group of animals has a higher rate of endangerment than amphibians. Scientists estimate that a third or more of all the roughly 6,300 known species of amphibians are at risk of extinction. The current amphibian extinction rate may range from 25,039 to 45,474 times the background extinction rate” (Center for Biological Diversity, “The Extinction Crisis” www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis).

\(^{215}\) Nixon 2011, 16.

\(^{216}\) Tanis MacDonald addresses a similar point in her article “Bioregion, Biopolitics, and the Creaturely List: The Trouble with FaunaWatch,” stating that “A refusal to narrate, or exoticize, may be the morally stringent position to pursue, but if the lens of the camera eroticizes the object that it reproduces, as Roland Barthes suggests, what is the lens of the human eye doing to the observed animal? When I make a list, this is undoubtedly part of mourning the animals, for to seek them out as unusual, or abundant, examples of bioregionality and name them may be another iteration of the Biblical project, as Derrida points out” (150).
**senbazuru** as simple as possible, so attempting to include myriad interconnections would not only have been extremely challenging, but it might also have proven confusing and messy, muddying the message of the piece (I would add that this is a small scale, no-budget project, and my time and resources are limited). I have also found that the simplicity of the concept appeals to a broad range of participants, and that I have been able to persuade a large number of people (from a variety of backgrounds, many non-art and non-academic) to take the time to choose a species and fold a crane for it. The work’s message is clear, but there is also a subtle element of resistant mourning in the project and interactions I have with participants; no feelings or perspectives are forced on them, but the content and activity of the project opens a quiet space for potential reflection and feeling.

Extinction-focused artworks should also beware of “using” extinct species, instrumentalizing them as the allegorical figures Mick Smith warns against. On this issue of “using” the dead or dying, van Dooren acknowledges this as a potential problem, but nonetheless believes this kind of mourning (proleptic, resistant, extinction-related) to be of the utmost importance:

> While there is potentially a kind of respect and acknowledgement in this refusal to put the dead to rest, there is also an important sense in which the dead are ‘put to work,’ a kind of ‘use’ of the dead that Derrida (2001) has frequently cautioned against as an unethical (but, to some extent, also unavoidable) facet of mourning. And yet, as Derrida (1994) also acknowledges, ‘we know better than ever today that the dead must be able to work. And to cause to work, perhaps more than ever’ (120). The work to be done here is, first and foremost, the task of ‘getting it’ that these deaths, of individuals and of species, *matter*; that the world as we know it is changing; and that new approaches are necessary if life in its diversity is to go on. In this context, learning to mourn extinctions may also be essential to our and many other species’ long-term survival.

In its perhaps imperfect way, *1,000 Flyers* attempts to engage participants in the *mattering* of these other-than-human lives, which, as I mentioned above, is central to environmental ethics.

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218 Van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 143.
Chapter 9:  
CODA: VERNAL POOL

In the conclusion to the first section of this text, I alluded to the fact that other kinds of eco-art will be required to aid in a shift toward a more sustainable future. While mourning is an essential and realistic response to what Kangaloon: Creative Ecologies calls “the current cascade of ecological degradation and diminishment of life” and “an era of unfathomable loss,” more hopeful and visionary forms of engagement are also necessary to maintain the energy required to propel us into a new era of healing and justice. Kangaloon suggests that we must find creative ways to “respond with vision, love and hope” and “promote health, life and beauty.” Artists can be part of this “active hope” by creating projects that are ecologically sustainable in their intentions as well as their materials, collaborative/participatory in their processes, place-engaged and place-based, Indigenous-led, and “ecological” in the sense of bringing interconnection and intimacy with the other-than-human to the fore. Examples of such projects are Betsy Damon’s Living Water Garden (an inner city water-themed ecological park designed by the artist in collaboration with a team of scientists, engineers, and the local community in Chengdu, China; it is a “fully functioning water treatment plant, a giant sculpture in the shape of a fish [symbol of regeneration in Chinese culture], a living environmental education center, a refuge for wildlife and plants, and a wonderful place for people” that also cleans 200 cubic metres of polluted water

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219 Kangaloon is “is a fellowship of poets, scholars, artists and activists” including Deborah Bird-Rose. See http://kangaloongroup.org/ (accessed November 10, 2014). “The work of the fellowship is to create art, writing and scholarship from the depth of nature, to promote balance and sustainability in design, and to rethink economy as ecology” (Kim Satchell and Lorraine Shannon, “Introduction: Strange attractors, a thematic ecology, and a storm” TEXT Special Issue 20: Writing Creates Ecology and Ecology Creates Writing, October 2013, 3).

220 Satchell and Shannon, 3.

221 According to Timothy Morton: “Intimacy is […] a fundamental category of ecological thinking. What I call the ecological thought is the thinking of the interconnectedness of all beings, in the most profound possible way. Intimacy, therefore, is a key to this interconnectedness, and with it, the concepts we hold about sentience. Intimacy involves closeness with beings who may or may not be sentient – and how, finally, can we ever tell?” (“Dark Ecology of Elegy,” 257)
from the Fu and Nan rivers daily\textsuperscript{222}), Sharon Kallis’s \textit{Urban Weaver Project} (Kallis works with the city parks department and the Stanley Park Ecological Society in Vancouver to remove invasive species such as Himalayan Blackberry and English Ivy from local parks, and then teaches people how use these vines to weave baskets, cordage, and a type of netting which is returned to the parks as an erosion prevention strategy; Kallis’s project is a brilliant example of community engaged eco-art that works in collaboration with science and community participants to make tangible positive change in local ecosystems\textsuperscript{223}), and \textit{Utsám Witness} (an Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborative project that involved “citizens working together over ten years in creativity, ceremony and activism to save a beloved part of the Squamish Nation traditional Territory, now known as \textit{Nexw-áyantsut} from logging. […] Between 1997 and 2007 Farm License 38, encompassing Sims Creek in the upper Elaho Valley, became the site of a wholly different kind of protest” that saw droves of non-Indigenous people making weekend camping trips to the territory “to walk, sleep, eat, make art, have conversations and participate in ceremonies on this disputed land. […] Because of the actions of ten thousand people brought together by Squamish Nation Hereditary Chief Bill Williams, artist Nancy Bleck and the late mountaineer John Clarke, this land – a 50,000-hectare section of the Squamish Nation now known as Wild Spirit Places – was saved”\textsuperscript{224}). These generative, healing eco-art practices show

\textsuperscript{223} See http://urbanweaverstudio.blogspot.ca/, https://theurbanweaverproject.wordpress.com/, and http://sharonkallis.com/ (all accessed Aug. 10, 2015). I can attest to the quality of Kallis’s work as I attended one of her weaving workshops when I was in Vancouver in August 2012.
\textsuperscript{224} Utsám Witness, “The Book,” \textit{Utsám Witness} website, http://www.utsam-witness.ca/book. The rest of the quote reads: “It was a stunning example of how welcoming people to the land, showing them its physical and spiritual wealth and allowing them to experience it themselves transformed the way they saw it. And by quietly, cumulatively building a critical mass of people who had seen – witnessed – this land firsthand and come to view it as important; the Uts'am/Witness Project provided a new way for peacefully mobilizing people and preserving land from logging.” Images and videos can also be viewed at http://www.utsam-witness.ca/videos (accessed Aug. 10, 2015).
us ways that art can interconnect with science and social justice to create tangible change and improve the lives of human and other-than-human communities.

From fall 2013 to spring 2014 I worked on such a project with Toronto artist and naturalist Karen Abel (one of the other artists in *Indicator*). While not as explicitly bioremedial or justice-focused as the projects I have just mentioned, it did nonetheless use several eco-art strategies to engage and inform a large audience. Over the course of six months, Abel and I worked closely to realize the vision she had approached me with: a massive installation consisting of hand-collected melted snow poured into thrift store drinking glasses. Entitled *Vernal Pool* to reference the evanescent pools created each spring by melting snow and rainwater, the project was intensively participatory, relying on snowmelt collected by over 100 participants from six countries – 650 litres in total. The following is a description (published in *The Goose*) that I co-wrote with Abel:

*Vernal Pool* is an immersive, elemental water installation created as a participatory, contemplative inquiry into our transitory interrelationships with water and landscape.

From November 2013 to April 2014, 114 individuals across Canada and abroad gathered snow samples as a form of extrinsic artistic practice about place and precipitation. With the arrival of spring, the reservoir of melted snow was convened for four days at Toronto’s historic Gladstone Hotel to create *Vernal Pool*.

From the Latin word *vernalis*, meaning “of or belonging to spring,” a vernal pool is an impermanent freshwater wetland that typically forms in landform depressions each April from snowmelt and rainwater, providing vital natal habitat for amphibians and aquatic insects in Ontario and across North America. The meltwater of spring is the defining event for these evanescent breeding pools, which dry up with the heat of summer until they can be resurrected at the following winter’s end.

*Vernal Pool* considers the origins of Earth’s water and its infinite migrations through the physical processes of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, infiltration, surface run-off, and subsurface flow. Science suggests that water is as old as the Earth itself – an estimated 4.5 billion years – as virtually no new water has been introduced into the atmosphere since the planet’s earliest beginnings. In this sense, the water we drink is age-old. Continuously in motion, the surface water that humans and all other freshwater-dependent organisms
consume every day has been circulated from the land to the sky and back again in
the form of rain and snow since the beginning of time. In observation of this
perpetual movement across time and place, and our intersections with water in all
its manifestations, a winter-long snow gathering practice was undertaken by
participants in Canada, the United States, Germany, Hong Kong (rainwater), Italy,
and Japan.

Notable among the samples we received was an oolong tea bottle of
pristine snowmelt that Marika Viger collected on Thursday, March 6, 2014 at the
ancient Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples of Nikko (meaning “sunlight” or
“sunshine”), a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the mountains of Tochigi
Prefecture, Japan. The site is located within a 400-year-old cedar forest on the
island of Honshu. Viger gathered snow samples from all over the site and
specifically from the highest point at the Tokugawa Mausoleum, the final resting
place of shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, built in 1643. The sample was personally
delivered to us in Toronto by Viger’s sister, Kristine Mifsud.

Newfoundland artist Marlene Creates was an enthusiastic participa-
tant, given her career-long interest in place and her more recent work entitled A
Newfoundland Treasury of Terms for Ice and Snow (2011 and ongoing; see the
project at http://www.marlenecreates.ca/works/2013ice.html). She sent us a small
vessel of snowmelt with bits of pine tree detritus from her Boreal forest property,
along with a small handmade booklet explaining the various sites at which she
collected snow. For example: “Monday, March 3, 2014: Snow from the old
woman fluxing her geese yesterday, Blast Hole Pond River, Portugal Cove,
Newfoundland. The old woman is fluxing her geese is an expression for a light
fall of snow.”

Another sample of note was a large mason jar of still frozen snow that
Jessica retrieved from the studio of Edward Burtynsky on Tuesday March 25,
where manager Marcus Schubert had been storing it outside on the studio’s
window ledge to keep it from melting.

Like a confluence of spring runoff meandering to common ground, over
600 litres of snowmelt samples referencing geographically and perceptively
distinct chronicles of one (long) winter were transposed with the warmth of spring
to condense and meditatively pause at a seasonal meeting place, forming a
temporary water body – a kind of anthropological precipitation garden – in a
gallery space. Consisting of over 1,900 pieces of salvaged glassware filled with
snowmelt (and accompanying bits of organic matter), the installation evokes the
translucent egg masses that amphibians lay in ephemeral wetlands each spring. A
sound installation consisting of layered field recordings of rainfall and the spring
calls of Ontario frog species (spring peepers and gray treefrogs) designed by
Jessica animated the space, drawing viewers further into the symbolic ecosystem
of Vernal Pool.

Providing essential breeding habitat for many species, including the
endangered Jefferson salamander, vernal pools are sensitive sites that can easily
fall prey to the alterations of the land caused by agriculture and development.
Visitors to the exhibition expressed interest and concern for these lesser-known
phenomena, and a few shared with us the connections they made between the
manifestation of the water they were seeing in the nearly 2,000 drinking glasses in the installation and other forms of water upon which we depend in various seasons and at various times in our lives.

In this vein, a most personal connection was the parallel between the conception, planning, and execution of Vernal Pool and the conception, gestation, birth, and “fourth trimester” of Jessica’s son, who was born in January 2014, shortly after an ice storm brought Toronto to a near-standstill. During the unfolding of both the project and Jessica’s pregnancy, delivery, and first months with her baby, we noted connections to water: during her pregnancy, Jessica enjoyed swimming in various Ontario lakes as well as in the Mediterranean Sea; a good portion of her labour was spent in warm water; and shortly after the birth she discovered that her baby was delighted by splashing and floating in the bath.

Water and fertility feature prominently in an excerpt from Naomi Klein’s forthcoming book This Changes Everything: Capitalism v The Climate, in which she writes of her visits to the site of the BP oil spill: “Spring is the start of spawning season on the Gulf Coast, and [Klein’s guide Jonathan] Henderson knew these marshes were teeming with nearly invisible zooplankton and tiny juveniles that would develop into adult shrimp, oysters, crabs and fin fish. In these fragile weeks, the marsh grass acts as an aquatic incubator, providing nutrients and protection from predators. ‘Everything is born in these wetlands,’ he said… As our boat rocked in that terrible place – the sky buzzing with Black Hawk helicopters and snowy white egrets – I had the distinct feeling we were suspended not in water but in amniotic fluid…”225 While vernal pools are distinct from gulf marshlands, they serve a similar gestational purpose, and are similarly vulnerable to the ravages of environmental contamination. Our project called attention to our intimate (yet global), multifaceted, life-long, and life-giving connections with water.

During the summer of 2014, the melted snow was restored to the earth by the artists and project participants through a collective watering of gardens and urban greenspaces in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, honouring the continuation of the water cycle, and further reminding us of the interrelationships between the elements of life and art practice.


225 This quote was taken from an excerpt published in The Guardian online, September 13, 2014 (www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/13/greenwashing-sticky-business-naomi-klein).
*Vernal Pool* was the recipient of the 2014 Jury’s Choice Award and the Ontario Association of Landscape Architects/GROUND Award (the only two awards given) during its exhibition as part of *Gladstone Grow Op: Exploring Landscape and Place* in April 2014. On the last day of the exhibition I led a “snow gifting” event, in which visitors and participants were invited to choose a glass of snowmelt, which I then poured into a jar and gave to them, after affixing a *Vernal Pool* tag to the jar and inscribing it with the name of the recipient. We then instructed them to use the snowmelt to water their gardens or other local plants, thereby restoring the melted snow to the earth as mentioned above. A gallery of participant snow collection photos as well as photos of the final installation can be viewed at [http://vernal-pool.tumblr.com/](http://vernal-pool.tumblr.com/).

Image 75: *Vernal Pool* ‘snow gifting.’ Photo credit: Ken Brill.
Attention to place is one of many vital components of becoming an “ecologist” or an ecological “denizen” in the sense that Mick Smith uses these terms (the first of which I quoted above). Vernal Pool emphasized a mindful engagement with place, especially as we asked all participants to document their “snow gathering” and provide us with a brief note about the

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place.227 A large poster on the wall of the space listed all contributors and the places they gathered their snow. The sound installation I created, which I called *Vernal Chorus*,228 encouraged a sense of relationship with the creatures (gray treefrogs and spring peepers) for whom vernal pools are essential places for breeding. At the same time as being highly attentive to specific places, the project also emphasized the ubiquity, mobility, and interconnectedness of water and the water cycle. Just as occurs in vernal pools, the snowmelt was all mixed together in the installation, meaning that no one could trace their contribution (aside from a few telltale pieces of detritus including pine needles and an oak leaf – yet even these were surrounded by a new mixture of water). Beth Carruthers writes of the importance of interconnection and place, and adds that artists “can broaden this focus so that the local is seen in perspective as nested and interdependent within a matrix of world ecosystems.”229 *Vernal Pool*, I believe, successfully engaged both local place as well as a broader sense of biospheric community.

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227 I would like to mention two other place-based projects I undertook during the course of my Ph.D. First, inspired by Marlene Creates, I designed a site-specific ‘place award’ project for the students in Ted Rettig’s second-year sculpture class at Queen’s in 2012. Creates has worked with community groups in Newfoundland to create award ribbons for places that are meaningful to individual participants; she and the participants then make trips to install the awards and tell the stories of those places. Instead of using ribbons and non-biodegradable decorations, I instructed the students to use materials that originated in the site, and which could be left at that site. I made an award for my balcony garden as an example, and invited students to make their own awards for places that they found meaningful. The resulting awards (including a funny piece made mostly of macaroni to honour the kitchen [and undergraduate food budget] of a house shared by two of the young women in the class, and a little nest made of grass, sticks, and bits of other detritus, with an origami bird cradled inside, created by another young woman to honour Ban Righ Hall, her first-year residence), and the walking tour we went on to present the awards to their places, were playful, engaging, and meaningful tributes to places and memories, and they helped build a greater sense of community amongst the students while also heightening an awareness of our relationships to those places. The second project took place on the VIA train (“The Canadian”) on the way home to Toronto from Vancouver, BC. Inspired by some of the place-based ecological artwork I learned about at the ALECC conference I had attended, I wrote place-based haiku – little observations about some of the places we were passing and stopping at along our route, and secretly posted them in various public places in the train. This playful, performative guerrilla art gesture was meant to engage train passengers in moments of focus and attentiveness to our ecological surroundings, even though those surroundings were constantly changing as the train sped from place to place. An engagement with place is an important component of a sense of deep engagement and a resulting responsibility for that place, and these works attempt to communicate this sensitivity and sensibility.


229 Carruthers, “Art, Sweet Art”, 27.
One of the tangible effects of projects such as *Vernal Pool* is awareness – and indeed, many *Vernal Pool* participants and viewers commented on their newly-gained knowledge of vernal pools and the threatened species\(^{230}\) that rely on them; one participant said that her children had delighted in running from puddle to puddle during a spring walk in the woods, shouting (inaccurately but enthusiastically) “Vernal pool! Vernal pool!” In her article “Art as Activism, Activism as Art”, Kirstin Dufour states that “[b]y employing strategies that involve collaborations and communities, processes rather than products, artistic production in the social realm rather than in museums, artists are able to effect and challenge social realms beyond the specific context of art itself.”\(^{231}\) So while *Vernal Pool* was not intended to be activist *per se*, it

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\(^{230}\) Among these species are gray treefrogs and spring peepers. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, “Frogs, toads, and salamanders are disappearing because of habitat loss, water and air pollution, climate change, ultraviolet light exposure, introduced exotic species, and disease. Because of their sensitivity to environmental changes, vanishing amphibians should be viewed as the canary in the global coal mine, signaling subtle yet radical ecosystem changes that could ultimately claim many other species, including humans” (“The Extinction Crisis” www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis).

\(^{231}\) Kirstin Dufour, “Art as Activism, Activism as Art”. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* (24, 2002), 157. Carruthers states that “there are four modes of engagement central to all EcoART works: collaboration, community, conversation and education” and she affirms that learning and new awareness are integral to these projects: “In all cases, they focus on learning – learning about habitats, ecosystems and how to dwell sensitively in the world. This learning results from conversations that take place inside the work, in the collaborative making of the work, as interchanges with the work itself and within the community” (“Art, Sweet Art,” 26). Of course, some viewers regarded *Vernal Pool* as a novel installation, a momentarily captivating artwork and nothing more. But for those who spent more time with the work and who continue to experience it in its online manifestation, I believe that valuable learning occurred.
may nonetheless have produced a small ripple of awareness, challenging those who encountered it to attend more closely to place, local ecosystem phenomena, and the vital yet increasingly precarious condition of the global water cycle.

Chapter 10:
CONCLUDING POSTSCRIPT

The projects in this analytical archive have formed the core and substantive component of my Ph.D. dissertation. I mentioned above that they are intended to be regarded as a collage or constellation of interconnected ideas and images that, together, form a whole, with this text providing a supporting conceptual framework, discussion, and documentation. My artworks and research are ongoing, as *1,000 Flyers* attests. And while the birth and first 18 months of my son’s life have been in many ways exhausting, my role as a mother adds new significance, energy, and urgency to my role as an ecologically engaged artist striving to make a meaningful contribution toward a more sustainable and just future. I am grateful to be engaged in this work.
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