

The Roots of a New Practice

Oxalis

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I first heard about the group Knowing the Land is Resistance on the *Earth First! Newswire* or some other such website. It was at once both a pleasant reminder that I needed to get off the computer, and a bit of inspiration that is often missing in anarchy land.

The group is based in the occupied territory currently known as Hamilton, Ontario. They've produced three excellent zines—two called *Knowing the Land is Resistance* and a third called *Towards an Anarchist Ecology*. The writing—at times beautiful—relates their experiences becoming (re)acquainted with the land in their area and urges readers to pursue the deeper questions regarding the alienated and damaged relationships that many of us have with the land.

OXALIS: What is Knowing the Land is Resistance? How did the project get started—what initially motivated you all to pursue this path of exploration?

KNOWING THE LAND IS RESISTANCE:

Mostly, we really wanted to celebrate all the wild spaces we love, how these places sustain our courage in our lives and resistance. We wanted to encourage other folks to connect with the health, healing and hope that exist in the land.

We started out by doing workshops, inviting folks to go out into the then-wintery wild corners of the city and pretty simply just encouraging them to treat themselves to some quality forest time. We wrote a report-back from the first workshop and published it in *Mayday Magazine*, a local monthly magazine, along with some reflections from talking with workshop participants about breaking down the alienation imposed by city life. We continued writing monthly features based on exploring the wild spaces in the area and those texts became the first two KLR zines.

There was a strong intention from the start to intertwine a love for the land with an anti-capitalist and anti-colonial dialogue. We knew rooting these ideas in the land where we live was a good way to make real and tangible those sometimes—obscure ideas and find ways to weave them into our everyday lives (not just our days off when we go deep into the forest).

O: One of the things that I immediately liked about your project was that the name “Knowing the Land is Resistance” seemed to contain the answer within it. Your choice eschews the usual approaches of choosing something cryptic or excessively militant—it suggests a slowness and sense of reflection that often seems missing from anarchist projects. Could you explain what you mean when you say “Knowing the Land is Resistance”?

KLR: The name really goes both ways: resistance without knowing the land is hollow and so is knowing the land without siding with it and fighting for it. Settlers today on Turtle Island

especially have so much work to do in developing this connection, as we are possibly the most alienated from the earth of any humans ever before. We have a lot of respect for naturalists and their careful commitment to knowing and spending time with the land, even though it tends to be disengaged and conservative. We also have a lot of respect and love for the bravery and passion of anarchists and activists, even though these scenes are usually very uprooted and not grounded in place. KLR seeks to bridge gaps in those practices— hence the name.

We also know from listening to older and more experienced anarchists and land defenders that getting people out on contested land is the best way to get them caring about it enough to fight for it in a committed and sustained way. The slowness and sense of reflection you are referring to reflects the fact that our projects are long-term and take a lot from us in terms of care and commitment.

O: In your writings, you have suggested a deeper and closer connection to the land could strengthen existing social struggles. For example, you speak of gentrification and Hamilton and imply that those efforts could be strengthened with a more land-based approach. Can you elaborate on this? Also, what are some social struggles that embody the approaches—or at least the orientation—that you are suggesting?

KLR: Gentrification, for instance, is very concerned with controlling space. It wants to rationalize space, strip the wild out of it, including ungoverned actions by humans, and bring marginal areas back into the economy. An example in our neighbourhood is the obsessive mowing of once-healthy meadows to make space for sod and security cameras – cutting down trees, tidying up vacant lots and alleyways, all this opens space up to technologies of control and destroys habitat. We know the people being displaced further east, and we knew the foxes and coyotes who would follow the tracks here before the massive new commuter train station came. We know how much less space there is for kids to play in trees and wild spaces outside of city logic now. In knowing these things, it's hard to argue that gentrification and progress is anything that improves lives. It's about destroying life and imposing control, and it's the opposite of health – we explored this in more detail in our workshop series, North End Raccoon Walk. This knowledge was already in people's hearts, and simply giving folks the space and permission to love areas that are normally considered blight was enough for all sorts of ideas to emerge.

It's tragic to see a brownfield that's been slowly healing for thirty years made into a short-sighted condo project, especially when we understand that developments like this also reproduce ways of life and relating to the land that are opposed to healing. It's about placing land back in the logic of economy, about rationalizing forgotten and slowly healing brownfields into short-sighted condo projects. Resisting development on the basis of rewilding and healing is a total refusal – there is very little possible compromise. It also brings with it a set of tactics, beginning with walks on sites that we're normally taught to fear and escalating towards occupations and blockades. All of these steps also break down private property and re-establish a sort of commons.

One example of this right now is in Kingston, Ontario, where folks are trying to prevent the construction of a new road over a river-side park. This road would allow the further development of both existing urban areas and of healing brownfields (and these are some of our favourites anywhere). Most of the opposition to the road shares its goal of putting a dirty, weedy park back into economic use, just not a road, but anarchists there are having traction emphasizing the importance of collective, ungoverned space, the defense of urban wildlands, and a watershed-scale understanding that even a former tannery site is important to the health of the whole region.

We saw other examples of this during our Seeds of Resistance tour, where we did nature-connection workshops for groups engaged in land defense or anti-development struggles. In Peterborough at that time, students were organizing to prevent a wetland adjacent to the university from being developed into a privately-owned but university-partnered dormitory, something they saw as a step towards privatization. They wanted to connect the arguments around privatization to a defense of the wetland, but by spending time there, they developed ideas around unexpertness that could attack both universities and development at a much higher level.

O: While I enjoyed the two *Knowing the Land is Resistance* zines and the way that you all have undertaken a specific effort to get to know your land base (and indeed I feel the approach is one that more folks should take), *Towards an Anarchist Ecology* probably made the biggest impression on me as it seems to be your most theoretical work and had the most to offer folks outside of the Hamilton area. Can you explain what you mean by “anarchist ecology” for those who have not yet read the zine?

KLR: Amazing! That’s so good to hear about because that was our intention. Those first two KLR zines are really specific to here where we live. They are good examples of what that process can be like, but unless they inspire you to go and get giddy about the place you live, the idea might be hard to share because it isn’t easily distilled into words on a page. After doing that work for four years, we felt like it made sense to reflect and compile what we learned in a theory-based way: that’s *Towards An Anarchist Ecology*. We wanted to celebrate liberatory approaches to a science, to a process of inquiry, like the cyborg witches in Spain and the work of some of our most inspiring herbalist friends.

Ecology is often seen as a progressive discipline in itself, because it tends to be less reductive and come more often into conflict with capitalism than other hard sciences. But we feel that the mainstream practice of ecology does not have liberatory potential and in fact has come to produce a new alienating hierarchy of experts that primarily serve to justify more and greener destruction of the wild.

It’s one thing to offer a critique, but it’s a bigger challenge to offer an alternative. The rest of the zine seeks to lay out five starting points for an anti-colonial, anti-authoritarian way of connecting with the land. These starting points are: rooted in relationships, deep listening, urban ecology, re-enchanting, and unexpertness. We have tried to identify and avoid the usual pitfalls of cultural appropriation, de-politicization, escape, expertly arrogance, and hastily jumping to an energetic or spiritual way of connecting.

At the root of it, we believe that everyone, wherever they are, inhabits a watershed and is a dynamic living creature that is part of a complex and beautiful web of interrelationships. We can choose to ground ourselves in this truth, to connect with the land around us, and let the health of our communities guide our actions. We hope folks who pick up this guide find something in it to help you in breaking with this stifling society of control and in finding lives of freedom and wildness.

O: One thing I noticed while reading is that while you all speak to the importance of anarchy and anarchist approaches, there aren’t a lot of direct references to the green anarchist tradition. Do you all have any connections to that trajectory of thought and has it influenced your project in any specific way?

KLR: We’re definitely very influenced by green anarchy and see ourselves as part of that tradition. Particularly, we value the analysis of alienation from the wild and from each other as a state that was deliberately produced over centuries, and the anti-civ critique. However, one of

our starting points for KLR was a sense that the green anarchist space was too ideologically motivated and not strongly rooted in place or personal connection. Flipping through old issues of GA, it's interesting how much the placelessness and focus on intellectual proofs in most of the articles recreates the kinds of alienation they set out to smash.

We set out to strip away some of our own ideological baggage and see if we couldn't reach green anarchist conclusions by developing our connection with our local landbase. The first two KLR zines are a pretty good description of what this project looked like for us, here between the escarpment and Hamilton Bay. We found that not only could we reach similar conclusions (industrial civilization is killing the earth) but those conclusions often came along with concrete ways to ally with the health of the land.

A lot of other people set off from the green anarchist space in pursuit of rootedness around the same time we did, often by developing what's called primitive skills, and a lot of them ended up strongly influenced by the Wilderness Awareness School. Although we definitely draw from some of their ideas, we have some big wariness of the WAS, especially as it is explicitly hostile to struggle, glorifies colonization, and recreates a settler survivalist attitude. We have tried to offer a sustained critique of their practices while also pirating their best ones and creating alternatives.

Some of us have been spending time in EF! spaces lately, and we think there is a lot of potential there to relate more to the colonial history of the land and rooting direct action in a deeper relationship to the land. People there strongly desire that relationship and have a lot of courage, but there's not always a lot of willingness to consider meaningful decolonization and to face up to just how alienated we are from the land. Unfortunately, adopting green anarchist principles on the level of ideology, rather than the level of relationships, seems like it can actually make it harder to develop that relationship to the land, because of the sense that we do or should somehow just already have it by virtue of our identification with those principles.

O: Moving beyond writing and ideology, what for me seems most exciting about Knowing the Land is Resistance is that you are thinking through some of the big questions, for example, asking how we can develop relationships with the land and what that means when many of us live on land that has been wrecked by cities, civilization, and colonization. I was particularly struck by the way you talk about the importance of finding land and wildness in urban places. How have you all done this with your project and why was this an important to you?

KLR: It's so hard to face up to all the destruction and loss, but also so important. Even in the hearts of cities, the wild is always there, pushing back, waiting for us to return to it. Even on Hamilton's industrial piers, we find coyotes, seedlings, and brave poplar trees. The myth of the pristine wild space actually harms us at this point, because it devalues all the other land that is considered damaged. Yes, we need to protect those few remaining least-devastated spaces, but for the most part, that's not what wildness on this planet looks like any more. We need to grieve this loss while still centering ourselves around interconnected systems like watersheds. Looking at the health of a whole watershed makes it obvious that the patch of Junk Trees in the parking lot is doing important work to create health and habitat for the whole system. The myth of pristine wilderness always has us looking elsewhere for wildness, and feeling like we need to uproot ourselves in order to go find it, when in fact this is the opposite of useful. It sets us back in our own relationship to the land, and also is frequently damaging to those few remaining old growth places.

Having a connection to the land, even and especially in cities, helps us stay grounded and committed, even when things feel hopeless. It reminds us that amazing things are possible with

a slow push towards deep relationships and a rejection of civilized ways, aligning our hearts to the moss and mullein creating soil on the concrete pads of abandoned fuel storage terminals...

O: Beyond personally becoming acquainted with the land, your collective has also toured Ontario and given numerous workshops that expand on the themes you raise. Your workshop guide—*Learning from the Land*—is quite impressive and is something that I could see being useful for a lot of readers of *Black Seed* who are interesting in encouraging similar conversations and processes in their own areas. How has the response to the workshops been among participants? Have there been any successes or challenges that stand out? How have these workshops continued to surprise or excite you?

KLR: Probably the biggest surprise and most important challenge was how much fear and trauma can be brought out by engaging with our senses in the forest. It's not easy to enter the forest – sure, we can just walk in, but to really quiet our minds and be present can bring up overwhelming feelings of loss, inadequacy, alienation, fear, as well as traumatic memories. We need the voices of trees, the cool breath of the forest, and the presence of stars to feel healthy and strong, but when we begin to open ourselves to these things, we first encounter how much we've been hurt.

In each of our first several workshops, one or more participants would need to leave or would cry because of what was coming up for them. Once it was tied to memories of a childhood forest or meadow that became a clearcut or mall, another time it was a more recent lost land defense struggle, with the trauma of police violence combined with watching a piece of land and the life you had with it be destroyed. Other times it was less directly connected to specific stories about land, a more abstract despair or fear.

In this way, our workshops came to focus on building relationships, with ourselves, with each other, and with the land. Can we find space to build some trust among strangers? Can we transform hurt and alienation back into possibility and wonder? Can we make this healing part of movements in real, physical defense of the land, and what does it mean to do so?

O: I find great affinity with the ways in which you all have chosen to write and talk about our relationship with the land, both in your writings and in your workshops. You use words like “wonder,” “joy,” “play,” and “enchantment” to talk about how we relate to the land. I also liked how you de-emphasize “expertness” and formal plant names, stating that answers terminate thought and discussion, while questions lead to more questions. Could you elaborate on this a bit and how this philosophy relates to your overall approach?

KLR: It sounds like you know about the immensely fulfilling joy of connecting with the land, too! We talk about *re-enchantment* a lot, because we all have that freedom, play, joy and life inside of us. It's a constant struggle, for us and maybe everybody, to keep that stuff stoked and alive in this world. One way to push back is to reject the ugly, stifling idea of expertness. We find un-expertness inspiring because it destroys the myth that “someone else” is better equipped to deal with the massive, ongoing ecological destruction. We also want to go beyond the pretty toxic expertly behaviour that narrowly celebrates names and taxonomy in more naturalist-y spaces. We often hear people describe the reason they don't engage with wild spaces is because they don't know enough.

Finding time to be present, think deeply, and feel joy in connecting with the land can get us out of our heads and into our bodies. Generally, anarchists could use some more joy and play.

O: I also like how you talk about spirituality and encourage people to approach it cautiously. *Black Seed* has been interested in fostering a conversation about spirituality and green anarchy. Why do you urge caution around this topic?

KLR: It's pretty understandable that people seek to fill the void of alienation created by this society with something positive, something that promises a deeper connection to the wild. However, our experience is that often people want to rush to talking about magic, animal spirits, literally hearing words from trees, that sort of thing, while skipping over the long, hard work of getting to know their landbase on its own terms. Similar magical practices exist in various indigenous land-based traditions around the world, but for settlers (especially white settlers) living in the land called North America, we need to appreciate just how gone those traditions are for us. They are really, really gone. There isn't an older, earth-based culture for settlers still clinging to existence on the margins of industrial society, the way there was in Europe until the end of the 1700s. There is nowhere for us to escape to when we realize the lives and worldviews we have been given are crap.

The project of rebuilding a land-based tradition for uprooted people is a beautiful one, but it can only be a humble and slow starting place for settlers, and potentially a multi-generational project. Around the world, spiritual knowledge is held and passed on by wise elders, drawing on knowledge and traditions accumulated over generations and rooted in intricate knowledge of the relationships between the plants, animals, waters, and lands of their territories. It isn't respectful to the beauty of earth-based cultures to think we can somehow get around the absence of elders and traditions just by wanting to. We believe that learning to really pay attention to the wild, to observe it with our physical senses, learning to read the land and understand how to ally with its health is the best starting point for this exploration.

O: I see the conversation around spirituality as being quite connected to how we talk about colonization and what it means in the context of folks living on stolen land. I also feel as though it—spirituality for lack of a better term—has at least some type of relationship to science as an alternative way of looking at the world. In your writings you have been critical of science and what you call “dominator ecology.” What do you mean by “dominator ecology”? At the risk of setting up a simplistic binary, do you see criticisms of science and discussions of spirituality as being connected?

KLR: We decided to describe the mainstream science of ecology as “dominator ecology” to refocus attention on the power relationships created by the practice of science as it is commonly carried out. “[It] is the ecology of management from a distance, and of remote expertise, that sees itself as fundamentally separate from the land, inhabiting a present without a past or future.” In *Towards an Anarchist Ecology* we further trace out how the practice of dominator ecology upholds colonial and capitalist structures while enforcing our alienation from the land by situating it as the realm of experts. We see reclaiming inquiry and the roots of science as absolutely vital in rebuilding a connection to the land, which will lay the groundwork for any land-based spirituality that might arise.

We need to critique and fight dominator science to create space for us to trust our own experiences again, while reclaiming from it the tools we might need. We also need to prevent the space created in this way from being hastily filled by a supposed spirituality that projects our assumptions about the land back onto it, recreates our own alienation from it by trapping us in our own egos and imaginings, and supports new claims of unaccountable knowledge.

It might sound like we're being really hard on spirituality, but it's because we consider it to be too important a project to move hastily. There is a huge grief involved in recognizing that we truly are alienated from the land, that there is no easy way out, that we really are so ignorant. We need to truly feel that and cultivate humility in the sorts of knowledge we claim access to. Our experience is that observing the wild closely and honestly leads inevitably to action in its defense and to clashes with power—the more these clashes are collective and sustained, the more we build a community that orients its values in line with the health of the wild. Such a community is the soil from which any spiritual practice might (re)grow.

In particular, we've found close observations of healing wildlands to be full of profound truths about how to live in this world. Take a walk down the traintracks, through old brownfields, rewilding farmlands, old quarries, around abandoned houses and buildings, and you'll see the plants and creatures who are courageously facing up to the utter devastation and who are working hard to recreate health and resiliency even in the most damaged places. Learning to appreciate the work being done by plants with deep taproots like chicory, burdock, and curly dock, for instance, not only inspires us to fight for health in hard situations, but gives us practical ideas about how this can be done. These are the roots of a new practice.

O: Finally, what has your collective been up to recently? How do you see your work continuing in the future?

KLR: We haven't been that active as a closed collective in the past few years. One big reason why we stepped back from KLR (at least for now) was it felt like we were beginning to occupy an expert-like role—it felt pretty silly to let ourselves become the experts in unexpertness. Our goal as KLR was to develop and then freely share simple practices for an anti-colonial and anti-capitalist way of connecting to the land, and we felt that through thirty or so workshops, our zines and posters, and the *Learning from the Land* guide, we had got some of these ideas out there. Continuing in the way we had as a closed collective didn't feel like it was in service to this goal.

These days, we like to encourage and support anyone who sets out to connect with the land, especially those who are determined to act. We continue to distro our resources and to support others in putting on workshops or developing actions. We love taking part in conversations about land defense, especially about spreading the practice of long-term land defense occupations in settler communities as a way of developing collective knowledge and practice of allying with the health of the land. We have also been prioritizing modeling good security culture and encouraging people to take this seriously in land defense.

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