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Tim Lilburn  
*University of Victoria*, [tlilburn@uvic.ca](mailto:tlilburn@uvic.ca)

Cary L. Campbell  
*Simon Fraser University*, [clc25@sfu.ca](mailto:clc25@sfu.ca)

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### ‘How to be here?’, dialoging into climate-change: an interview with Tim Lilburn

Tim Lilburn <sup>a</sup>, interviewed by Cary Campbell <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Writing, University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada.

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada.

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#### Abstract

#### Keywords

Place-  
connectedness;  
Climate-change;  
Contemplative  
pedagogies;  
Decoloniality

This interview with Canadian, poet, philosopher and essayist Tim Lilburn was commissioned for this Special Issue. Lilburn discusses with Cary Campbell, the general dilemma of ‘how to be here’ – both: how to connect to land and place as a member of settler society, as well as; how to inhabit this moment of acute climate crisis – discussing ideas from Lilburn’s (2017) previous book *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place*, and the forthcoming *Interiority & Climate-Change*. This interview follows up from an earlier dialogue between Lilburn and Campbell, published by *Philosophasters.org* in 2019, and republished below with permission.

Corresponding authors. Cary Campbell, Simon Fraser University; Tim Lilburn, University of Victoria.

E-mail addresses: [cl25@sfu.ca](mailto:cl25@sfu.ca); [tilburn@uvic.ca](mailto:tilburn@uvic.ca);

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**CC** In *The Larger Conversation: Contemplation and Place*, you articulated how, due to the acute intellectual and spiritual poverty of settler-culture and the settler-soul in North America, we are, as of yet, still in a stage of “pre-conversation” when it comes to projects/promises of Indigenous-settler reconciliation and decolonization. *Where are you personally in terms of this pre-conversation? Also, at a broader societal level, do you think the dial has moved in significant ways? Could this conversation ever occur?*

**TL** In *The Larger Conversation*, I was interested in establishing a relation with place. Knowing where I was, where I lived, seemed a rather important skill to have. At least, not having it seemed a little odd and made me feel incomplete.

But how to do this? How to establish a connection with place? No how-to books were to be found. No one advertised the capacity to teach me how to be autochthonous. I was driven in all this by something more than curiosity. By being unable to locate myself, link myself with my terrain, I had a sense of floating where I was. I knew few of the names of native plants around me and nothing of what they were useful for; I had not grown into where I was. My ignorance shocked and shamed me; I had grown up learning nothing in a land-knowledge sense. But if I could join myself with place, I was interested in seeing what effect this connection would have on my sense of self, my mental health, on my political engagement, on my theological and philosophical orientation.

I soon learned that the question “How to be here?” was by no means a simple one. It became clear to me that connection with place was based in part on how I looked at where I stood, but the look I needed to achieve was a particular one, not a glance, not a mining of data, not a taking in of scenery but an absorption in objects and parts of a locale, a taking in of a thing’s thisness, as a Gerard Manley Hopkins or a John Duns Scotus would say, a cliff’s haecceity, a hummingbird’s thereness. And it further occurred to me, as I moved through the years when I was preoccupied by this question, that the sort of looking I must learn would be rooted in a contemplative life marked by some of the traditional disciplines and contemplative states like *statio* (standing still), *quies* (delectable rest in a being or object) and *otium sanctum* (contemplative leisure). This is where the sort of looking I sought, lived, and flourished. But this contemplative tradition had long vanished from religion, both mainstream Catholicism and the United Church of Canada, and had been absent even longer from Western philosophy. So I was bereft.

I was doubly bereft, in fact, since it struck me later that my distance from the world also had arisen from the fact that I occupied a colonial position in my society. As George Grant and Val Plumwood pointed out, you cannot have a healthy relationship with something you are committed to master. How to decolonize my seeing and how to develop a contemplative life that vivified my relations with nature struck me as mammoth problems. It occurred to me that my culture had come to the new world interiorly impoverished and then had sunk further into chthonic amnesia and impoverishment.

I speculated early in *The Larger Conversation* that because of this pan-cultural poverty people like me, at the very best, were in a state of “pre-conversation” with Indigenous people. Because we had not retrieved a contemplative capacity to truly see where we were we had little to contribute to any such conversation. Are we further along now? Are we more contemplative, more likely in the academy and elsewhere, to prize primary process as a form of knowing, to waste time in *pingue otium*, to efface ourselves before things (see ourselves as below all irrational things and know they are without blame as one of the 4th century monks in the Egyptian

desert advised)? I am not sure we are. Such occupations are numinous seditions as I argue in the new book and are unlikely to have widespread appeal. Are we more prepared to renounce colonial residue in ourselves and so become available for conversation with Indigenous people, conversation that has the land in it? What would people like me speak but a version of Might's tongue. For some diasporic Europeans in North America, there is only mastery or rage, as we've seen during the pandemic. Contemplative practice would broaden this band of emotion, speech and being.

Could these conversations ever occur, you ask. Yes, if one is struck deeply enough by beauty or by dread, there is movement. But beauty is the greatest draw, and we have known this since Plato. Thus it is important to note and praise the earth. Our proper self is elongated, self with land, not atomic, and love is the power of linkage.

**CC** While I was recalling a gulf-island trip at a gathering at your place some years back, you pulled out a large dictionary of the Saanich Language and took the time to look up the particular names of the Islands we were discussing. You also made connections to other words/concepts in the Saanich Language. *Can you speak about your own process/journey of connecting to place/land through local Indigenous knowledge and languages? What is significant about the way these concepts and place-names interact with landscapes and environments?*

**TL** I have been learning SENĆOŦEN from the W̱SÁNEĆ poet, language-keeper, knowledge-keeper Kevin Paul over the last several years. This study has been some of the most important work that I have done. SENĆOŦEN is a language, I am told, that comes from the ground and, in my view, it is beautiful. The little I know, the names of trees, of places, of winds, of inner states, has always been liberating and gathering. By this, I mean the words draw one toward inclusion. I am very grateful to Kevin for leading me into the language and only wish I was a better student – my vowel pronunciation, I am told, is terrible. The words protect and help. I believe knowing and speaking the correct names of places and things is a courtesy toward the land. The true names are not made up but received; language is an artifact of the land.

**CC** To reference the name of your recent colloquium — *what does it mean to write into climate-change?* This 'writing into' seems significant to me, especially in a context when we are overwhelmed each year with new books and writing, that, even when supposedly about climate-change, seems to turn away from the problem -- existentially, contemplatively— in an incessant push towards solutions/tecno-fixes.

**TL** I organized a colloquium and manuscript consultation service this January and February, calling it "Writing into Climate Change." It was made up of a series of group meetings and individual editing sessions extending over a six week period. Kevin Paul joined the group gatherings from time to time. I could accommodate only five writers and five manuscripts at a time, so we were a cozy bunch. I plan to offer a second colloquium in the fall. Each of the writers in the version ending next week, poets, writers of creative nonfiction, interpreters of myth, has been trying to insert their process into the cataclysm of global warming; all of them are caught up in the dire spirit of this historical moment.

I and the participants were curious about the possible appearance of "crisis imagination" in their work, a response to disaster the poet Eleanor Wilner finds in Blake and Yeats and I see in the Louis Riel's revolutionary materialism in his *Massinabican*. People need interior refugia in these new times to stand in and shape and in which they can commit epistemological and ethical seditions in their relations with the other-than-human that the times call for.

These places of standing, instances of apocalyptic imagination, will be provisional huts to occupy in the high winds that are present now and those greater winds that will come. We can think from these modest shelters. The domiciles found within the first Writing into Climate Change group – a contemplative, courteous, neighbourhood polity; a conatus or sentience discerned beyond the human, presenting the possibility of a broader solidarity; the practice of what Ashlee Cunsolo calls activist mourning – all these options sway away from the status quo and all activism in them will arise in some way from a contemplative root. Will our supporters in this larger, pan-species union be destroyed in heat domes, drowned in atmospheric rivers? There is no doubt many of them will be. But their linkage to us is invaluable, miraculous and ours to them is justice.

**CC** As an environmental educator, I've noticed that young students are often quite knowledgeable and aware of 'the facts' of climate-change, but are often frustrated that their education, by and large, has offered them few opportunities *to exist* and *to be* in relation to this immense topic. What I've noticed in your work is an opening towards approaching climate-change, and what we might call the Anthropocene condition, as a contemplative and ontological problem — “a problem concerning interiority” as I've heard you put it before and as captured in the subtitle of your (forthcoming) book *Numinous Seditions: Interiority & climate-change*. This is attractive to me as an educator: not to offer solutions from a place of hubris or technocratic certainty — not jumping immediately to 'how do we fix this?' — but rather addressing the more foundational question of 'how can we inhabit ourselves in this time?'.

But here my students remind me that “inhabiting today” can be taxing and difficult (especially when today means fires, smoke, floods, heat-domes, bio-diversity loss, future uncertainty, etc.). So, with all this complexity in mind, *how do you articulate the aims/forms/values of contemplative practices and contemplative pedagogies in a time of run-away, climate-crisis? What inner dispositions and habits of life might sustain us in this work?*

**TL** I agree with what I take to be your students' position: the task to “save the world,” a vocational titanism, usually ends in despair and fruitless anger. It also can produce a freezing in our behaviour. But smaller, local, interior initiatives like the ones I have just mentioned may be more welcoming. Each of them could be taken up as a form of life.

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**Placeless drifting, colonization and reconciliation as interior journey** (an earlier 2019 Interview with Tim Lilburn)

**CC** In “Contemplation and Place”, you speak at length about how the proposed reconciliatory conversation between settlers and indigenous peoples in Canada can have no hope of occurring without a recognition of the deep spiritual and intellectual poverty that afflicts North American settler culture. At a basic level, I think this has always been upsetting to me, born and raised on the West Coast — how we are often completely dim to the land we inhabit; living next to mountains, rivers, and places, with their names and stories removed, unaware of their broader spiritual, ecological and historical significance. You say, contrary to top-down mandates such as the Truth and Reconciliation commission, that we are, as of yet, still in a stage of “pre-conversation” — unable to even dialogue with this land and the people who have taken care of it for millennia, until we reach deep into our own interiority as well as our own spiritual and contemplative traditions.

As an educator, I'm interested in how we can practice a 'pedagogy of hope' within global structures that often seem (and are) repressive, reductive, impersonal, and instrumentalized.

These days, I often see my own students and friends flirting with cynicism, anxiety, and despair, and I realize this may be, as you say, an important first step (i.e. chapter two in your book entitled “The Start of Real Thinking”), but it can also be paralyzing and self-defeating. As Western Canada is still very much defined by many through the extraction of resources and wealth, and not our commitments to contemplation and place, how do you sustain hope (or, rather what keeps you from despair) that this conversation is even possible? [LIL] [SEP]

**TL** Colonialism has many causes – greed, racism, a rampant will to power. I would add to this list certain epistemological allegiances and the deficits in one’s being-in-the-world they foster. European culture’s post-Cartesian proclivity for a certain form of knowing, a certain form of what many take to be cognitive rigour, has caused the closing down of the contemplative tradition in European thought. This has meant, because of the pedagogical attachments that mark this seemingly lost tradition, that conversation, attention, interior transformation have undergone a complete loss of philosophical significance. It is not surprising that settler culture does not comprehend where and what home is, since it does not know how to see, to take in, individualities and their relationships. So, yes, people like me are in a state of “pre-conversation” in the matter of reconciliation, hoping to learn, if one is lucky, intellectual humility—Keats’ negative capability—so that a space may grow in the self where the actual world might appear.

Another aspect of the pan-cultural injury, or poverty, in which folks like me live is that, not truly taking in where I am, I cannot be bound to that place, making autochthonicity difficult, if not impossible, for me. Placeless even when at home, I cannot occupy the larger self, which is the atomic self leagued to, elongated by, the joy and sufficiency of one’s place. I float over a land I do not know, in an intellectual tradition offering no sapiential rooting. Anxiety, fret, drifting are to be expected under these conditions.

I wonder if there can be some joining of traditional contemplative practices and teaching at the post-secondary level. I’m mulling over this possibility these days in an essay I am working on called “Contemplative Practices, Contemplative Pedagogies.” For me, because of my background and reading, most of these practices come from the Platonic tradition in its Christian, Islamic, Judaic and Neoplatonist forms, but other sources of interior shaping are also possible. The conversation I yearn for is a long-shot, but hunger tells me there might be a way.

**CC** You also speak about the need for a *pedagogy of attention*, a deep sensorial “feasting attention”. Today, it seems that so often, and perhaps increasingly so with technology, our attention is being taken away from where it needs to be, from the places we dwell in and the relations that sustain us. As a teacher yourself, is this something you notice with your students, and if so, how do you cultivate and awaken people to what it even means to be attentive (something, I think I myself have only recently begun to understand)?

**TL** Hunger is the great teacher. Plato tells us (*Symposium*) that eros is half lack, half cunning. This description works for philosophical eros, political eros, eros connected with attachment to and identification with a place, as it does with most sorts of longing. Hunger and ingenuity: I have confidence in these powers to draw at least some of us along. Also, it’s important to remember that the savouring of haecceity is deeply delightful. Eros and sorrow, in my view, are ways ahead, and one should resist any persuasion to abandon them.

**CC** One reason why I have been attracted to your work is how you show philosophy-as-practice, emphasizing, as Socrates-through-Plato did, that philosophy is what turns the soul around. But I still often wonder, what is the place of philosophy and philosophers in this

hurried and fractured historical moment, where people seem to be left with little time for philosophizing or even realizing what it is and what it does? Furthermore, philosophy has become institutionalized and its wisdom increasingly fragmented and dispersed through different fields and specializations.

At the risk of posing a stupid question, how do you describe and explain the significance of philosophy for the everyday, as something that we can live with, and something that can be a part of us?

**TL** Philosophy is fulsome attention – which can occur in a moment – and conviviality, the willingness to engage in conversation about what one notes and what one yearns for or most deeply fears. That’s a pretty light toolkit. The monastery, says Zen, is wherever you are. The same could be said about contemplative philosophy and the hermeneutical circles that grow from it.

**CC** As the North American university has become increasingly corporatized and globalized, and as someone who works in college and university settings, do you think that the university can continue to be a site for the sustainment of wisdom traditions and meaningful practices? And furthermore, in your estimation, what kind of study and re-search is needed for this to occur?

**TL** Can the sort of undertaking I have been describing go on in the academy? Only, I think, on the edges, behind the surrounding shrubbery. Because the erotic, contemplative interiority I’ve been talking about and what gets us there, are transgressive, heterodox, not just in a university context, but throughout the culture. But there are pockets of practitioners here and there in most institutions, as I am sure you have found, and a handful of students are acutely aware of the philosophical poverty at the center of their lives and the thought-world they inhabit. Pandemic anxiety reports this poverty to us daily.

**CC** As we stand at the precipice of an uncertain and deeply frightening global climate emergency, there has been a lot of increased talk and writing about ecology and what it *should* offer us. In my estimation, much ecological writing lacks significance for two main reasons: it doesn’t seem to stem from or be rooted in a recognition of self (and the journey of becoming we undergo); and furthermore, the actual dynamism displayed by living eco-systems doesn’t seem conveyed in the structures and form of the texts themselves. Your writing seems to possess both these qualities -- through your emphasis on interiority but also the bringing together of diverse themes and voices from throughout time, history and place.

Can I ask you what the ecological essay means for you, and the extent to which you think writing as a practice can mirror or, in fact *be* ecological?

**TL** [to attempt an answer-in-progress:] I do believe more careful thinking around gardening, and the political economy that arises from community gardens, needs to be done, focusing possibly on what sort of citizenship might be appearing within this activity. I also suspect more thought should go into what could be called dialectic, Plato’s meaning of it, and its maieutics, or could be called “spiritual direction,” this inquiry leagued to the thinking about gardening. I also like Peter Maurin’s/Dorothy Day’s notion of the agronomic university. But aside from all this, I have nothing sure to offer. I capture much of this rumination on gardens and maieutics (I hope) in a new essay: “interiority and Climate Change,” which is still in design.