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## From Prometheus to Gaea: A Case for Earth-Centered Language

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### Abstract

This paper weaves together story and argument to make a case for a paradigm shift to Gaean discourse practiced through the adoption of Earth-centered language; language that critically considers the implications of word choices that may serve to disparage the Earth or reduce it to nothing more than a resource for humans, an anthropocentric frame for the planet. Earth-centered language may be helpful in achieving the goal of maintaining the integrity of the earth by positioning Earth as a master frame. Guided by the critical perspective and methodology of ecolinguistics, Gaean discourse and Earth-centered language could provide an environmental master frame that organizes other discourses in light of their moral, empirical, and aesthetic environmental concerns. Usage of the words “dirt” and “wasteland” provide case studies for a shift to Gaean discourse and Earth-centered language. Finally, the paper offers honesty, transparency, kindness, and creativity as guiding principles for Earth-centered language.

**Keywords:** Earth-centered language, Gaea, Prometheus, discourse, ecology, ecolinguistics.

### 1. Introduction

A case for Earth-centered language begins with the story of two divine beings from Greek mythology, Prometheus and Gaea. Gaea is Mother Earth, a primordial Greek deity, the mother of all life. She and Uranus (the god of the sky) are the parents of the Titans, as well as all beings on Earth (Smith, 2018). As a word, “Gaea” was resurrected in 1924 when it was used to name the late Paleozoic supercontinent “Pangaea”; with Pangaea translating to “all” (pan-) “Earth” (gaea) (“Pangaea”, 2018).

Prometheus, a Titan, is known as the champion of humanity. He is depicted as a clever being who first created humans out of clay and then stole fire from the gods to give to his creations. Not known for finding the charm in disobedience, Zeus punished Prometheus to an eternity of being bound to a rock and having his liver eaten by an eagle, day after day (Hansen, 2005).

Although Gaea eventually helped Zeus defeat the Titans (Hesiod, 2007), Promethean discourse, discourse that privileges humanity over the earth, is alive and well in contemporary Western society (Murphy, 2011). Seemingly ignoring Prometheus's horrific fate for privileging his creatures, humans continue on an environmental path that takes from the earth (Gaea, if you will) for their short-term benefit, while ignoring potential long-term consequences (e.g., deforestation, hydraulic fracturing).

In this paper, I weave together story and argument to make a case for a paradigm shift to Gaean discourse practiced through the adoption of an *Earth-centered language* perspective, a perspective that critically considers the implications of word choices that may serve to disparage the Earth or reduce it to merely a resource for humans, an anthropocentric frame for the planet. Earth-centered language is not a prescription of words to use; the concept is concerned with the contemplation of how we use words, their affects and effects, and what kind of ecosophy (ecological philosophy) they (re)produce. The stories we tell and the words we use to tell them (co)construct our own story; they become the “stories-we-live-by”, or “stories that exist in the minds of multiple individuals across a culture” that influence how we act in the world (Stibbe, 2015, p. 6). In order to change our fate, we must change our language. To that end, I make my case by, first, reviewing the importance of storytelling and frames in ecolinguistics; second, discussing the role of Promethean discourse in environmentalism; third, examining the promise of Gaean discourse and Earth-centered language; fourth, examining several problematic words in common use; and, finally, offering suggestions of how to move forward with Earth-centered language.

## 2. Storytelling, Words, and Frames

Fisher (1984) states that the human species can be considered *Homo narrans*; we are profoundly, and essentially, storytellers. Our societies, relationships, and senses of self are constructed through story. As Okri (1996, p. 21) states, “Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories that individuals or nations live by and you change the individuals and nations themselves.” Okri and Fisher are certainly not alone in their characterization of the role of language in shaping human identity and perceptions. Cognitive science provides evidence for the centrality of language in human life. Boroditsky and Gaby (2010) found that members of an Australian aboriginal community who used cardinal signs to describe all locations (e.g., referring to an insect on the lower part of one's left leg as being on the southwest limb) had a greater sense of physical orientation than other humans. Further, this spatial awareness afforded a construction of time based on cardinal direction, which is qualitatively different from other cultures' concepts of time. As Eagleton (1996)

indicated in his summary of Saussure's work on language and meaning, "Language is something I am made out of ... language is the very air that I breathe" (pp. 112-113).

Fisher's (1984) theory, the narrative paradigm, positions both the real and imagined human worlds as lived, created, and interpreted through symbols (i.e., words). The narrative paradigm consists of two primary themes: the argumentative, persuasive, and the literary, aesthetic. These themes afford the construction of myriad stories, all competing with other narratives (Fisher, 1984).

Stories are articulations of our perceptions and serve to both legitimate and instigate our actions (Kuletz, 1998). Thus, the stories that get (re)told and the language that we use shape our view of the world, become the stories-we-live-by (Stibbe, 2015), and establish our frames of reference (Lakoff, 2010) or cognitive rule systems (Eder, 1996). An individual's frames are typically unconscious constructions through which the individual makes sense of the roles, structures, and relationships in the world (Lakoff, 2010). A frame can be thought of as "a story about an area of life that is brought to mind by particular trigger words" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 47). For example, when climate change is framed as an environmental issue, it activates images of trees, polar bears, and things *out there*. When climate change is framed as a national security issue, it activates images of personal safety, the military and things *over here* (Stibbe, 2015). All knowledge makes use of frames, and every word activates frames that then characterize the word (Lakoff, 2010).

The interplay of stories and the language used to create them, and the influence of those stories and that language on the construction of the material world, offer fertile ground for understanding the twin inheritances of Prometheus and Gaea. To study that interplay, ecolinguistics provides a type of critical analysis and theoretical framework that illuminates how our words and stories act on the more-than-human world (Abram, 2017; Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001; Stibbe, 2015).

### 3. Bound to the Same Rock?

Because we are storytelling creatures, and the stories we tell create our frames, it is important for environmentalists to examine the narratives that shape environmental discourse. To understand how we have become estranged from the earth "requires looking at how we perceive the earth and how we represent it" (Kuletz, 1998, p. 139). Murphy (2011) argues that contemporary prevailing discourse, originating with industrialization (Dryzek, 1997), is Promethean discourse. Prometheus's gift of fire to humanity, which he obtained by tricking Zeus, afforded humans greater (co)construction of their world (Murphy, 2011).

Promethean discourse finds support in a familiar verse from the *Old Testament*: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish ... and over the fowl ... and over the cattle ... and over all the earth'" (Genesis 1:26 King James Version). Thus, Prometheus's actions, while offensive to Zeus, seem to be sanctioned by the God worshipped by many in Western capitalist societies. Indeed,

White (1967) concluded that no science or technological advancements could ameliorate the ecological crisis as long as the foundation of Western society is a narrative of Earth existing *for* humanity.

With Prometheus cast as a heroic figure, the plot of humanity is primed for growth and progress (Murphy, 2011). The Earth, and all its features, become framed as *resources* for humanity. Capitalism favors expansion. Indeed, capitalism tells us that a growing economy is a healthy economy, and Promethean discourse affords the use of Earth's resources for human progress.

However, Prometheus's story did not end with his giving fire to humanity and then living happily ever after. His defiance brought him a sentence of eternal torture. The actors inflicting his torture—the rock to which he is bound and the eagle that consumes his liver each day—are ones that we might label as “earthly resources”. Prometheus's fate is sealed, but our fate may not be. The question is: are we bound to the same rock?

#### 4. What's in a Name?

To change our story, we must (re)consider our words; therefore, it is important to address the significance of words before critiquing contemporary word choice. This section offers a brief history of language and the consequences of abstract representation.

##### 4.1. A Brief History of Language

In playing the game of “who or what is to blame for our present ecological crisis”, many contenders have been named: deep ecologists, ecomodernists, the Industrial Revolution, agriculture, lack of government oversight, too much government oversight, and so the list goes on. Two of the candidates, on whom much blame has been placed, have already been mentioned in this paper: Judeo-Christianity and the Greeks. Abram (2017) acknowledges they both played a role in changing how humans interact with the world. Rather than attending to our bodily sensations and lived experiences, both invited humanity to turn its attention elsewhere: Judeo-Christianity with an eye toward an other-worldly god and the Greeks with an emphasis on self-reflection. However, Abram (2017) takes another step back to identify a larger umbrella culprit: the alphabet and the language it affords.

Prior to the alphabet, our first “readings” were of our own physical tracks. Then, we began to paint and replicate the tracks of other animals. Although these paintings were, of course, abstract representations, they were connected to the natural world. Pictograms and ideograms emerged, and though more abstract than replication tracks, still maintained connections to the earthly world. Around 1500 BCE, the Semitic aleph-beth was developed, which dramatically changed language. Written language could now be accomplished with 22 characters, rather than hundreds and thousands. However, the aleph-beth still maintained some relationship to the nonhuman world. For example, the first letter, aleph, was depicted by a symbol that looked like the head of an ox, and aleph was

also the Hebrew word for ox. Finally, the Greek alphabet brought the most thorough level of abstraction from the natural world. The first letter, alpha, had no nongrammatological meaning, no link to the earthly world, and the symbol, “A” was turned over so that it no longer resembled an oxen head (Abram, 2017).

#### 4.2. Abstract Representation, Real Consequences

One of the affordances of the Greek alphabet is a forgetfulness of the abstractive, symbolic nature of the language; that is, because the letters have no sensorial reference point (Abram, 2017), and only exist as letters, it can be easy to forget that they are not the thing they come together to name (e.g., the letters s-n-a-k-e, separately and combined as they are, bear no sensorial relationship to the being with an elongated body, scales, and flicking tongue). This disconnect—between the symbolic nature of words and lived experiences—has been felt by many people at some time in their lives when telling a relational partner that their words (perhaps a statement like, “I’m sorry”) do not match their actions.

Words, however abstract, go on to shape our perceptions. As we continue to learn and experience, we continue to assign names to objects, events, and people. “Their names then affect the way they are perceived next time: once labelled, they are more speedily slotted into pigeon-holes in the future” (Douglas, 2002, p. 45). Further, the more objects and experiences that get slipped into holes, the greater investment in our labeling system becomes and the more it serves to act as a filtering mechanism (Douglas, 2002).

A consequence of the naming of things can be seen in the fate of a herd of bison. In 1990, several thousand bison at Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada were facing mass cull because of an outbreak of tuberculosis and brucellosis. Local, indigenous people and some scientists and conservationists were against the mass cull. Although some options were presented that did not involve a mass cull, and argued the bison should be protected under the Canadian Wildlife Act, there was a sticking point: the bison had been labelled “hybrid” (a mix of wild and domestic bison). Being labelled “hybrid” meant that these bison were considered “domestic” and thus not under the protection of wildlife management. At the public hearings, Chief Sewepagaham addressed this labeling, “If hybrid bison were at risk, the tribe would safeguard the animals by officially naming them as wood bison’ (which is what they had commonly been known as all along)” (Peterson, 1997, p. 107). Although his suggestion was rejected, it “enabled a fresh perspective by demonstrating that categorization is a social practice, rather than a natural practice” (Peterson, 1997, p. 107).

#### 5. Earth-Centered Language: “Breeding Lilacs Out of the Dead Land”<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of the stories we tell and the words we use to tell them, provides evidence of the importance of language as a source of ecological problems. The selection of Gaea for a new discourse can establish a construction of Earth that offsets problems caused by

Promethean discourse.

### 5.1. Why Gaea?

The nonhuman animal world is often described in strictly objective terminology. Seeking to avoid anthropomorphism, many overstep and engage in anthropodenial (de Waal, 1999)—an anthropocentric view that constructs humans as separate from the Earth and other nonhuman animals and positions humanity as the ultimate, if not only, subjects. One way that anthropodenial takes form is the Cartesian practice of describing nonhuman animal behaviors in mechanistic rather than human terms (Marchesini, 2015). It is true that one may overstep and anthropomorphize a nonhuman animal or at least a particular behavior, but likening a nonhuman animal's behavior to a machine—something created by humans—is more off-target than likening that behavior to a human, a living organism with whom extant animals co-evolved (Marchesini, 2015). Similarly, the Gaia hypothesis can be useful in describing the Earth as closer to a system—made up of synergistic interactions—than a man-made machine.

Neoclassical economics and neoliberalism—in short, Western economy and political principles—consider Earth inert because the institutional ideologies require Earth to be inert (Gray, 2007; Stibbe, 2015). Accepting Earth as a system would mean accepting its dynamism and understanding that our actions have real, lived consequences (Kuletz, 1998). Accepting Earth as a system would create exigencies for ecological behavior reform. Rather than engaging Earth as an object to be acted on, one would have to consider the well-being of the system, and this would require Western society to act in “homeostatic or equilibrational relation” with Earth (Abram, 2017). In short, it would mean engaging in Gaeian discourse.

This is not the first time Gaea's name has been invoked in such a manner. In the 1970s, Lovelock (2016) offered the Gaia hypothesis, which proposed that Earth was a self-regulating single organism formed by complex interactions between inorganic material and living organisms. The theory has attracted widespread criticism by scientists (for a more thorough analysis of the hypothesis and its criticisms, see Latour, 2017), and this paper neither affirms nor refutes the Gaia hypothesis. Indeed, part of the consideration of calling for Gaeian discourse, rather than Gaian discourse, is to avoid an entanglement in a scientific debate.

Further, Berman (2001) critiques the idea of Gaia as another way of perpetuating the Mother Earth frame. She notes that making the Earth female still serves to separate—to separate man from woman and man from nature, reproducing some patriarchal problems of environmental discourse and simultaneously creating some new problems through a matriarchal hierarchy. However, Berman also notes that Gaia has aspects of empowerment and ecofeminism. Concurring with Berman that maintaining an image of Earth as female is problematic, I again refer to Gaea, to reclaim the important and beneficial aspects of the word—hopefully drawing to mind thoughts of Pangaea, an image of wholeness and interconnectedness—without ignoring the valid concerns surrounding Gaia.

However, the Gaia hypothesis does offer a useful metaphor for Gaeian discourse: Earth as a system. To address the pervasive human-centrality in our language, we need better, less anthropocentric metaphors (Garrard, 2012). Gaea is such a metaphor; of the Gaia hypothesis, Goatly (2001) states:

Wholeness and interrelatedness are emphasized and the idea of exploiting one's environment as a resource becomes an obvious threat to the well-being of the ecosystem and the human race as part of it. Mining the earth for minerals is about as sensible as eating one's liver for nutrients. (p. 213)

If one accepts that broad distinction, that Earth is more like a system than an inert machine, without necessarily adopting all the tenets of the Gaia hypothesis, it becomes possible to afford Earth some subjectivity in narratives and discourse (Abram, 2017; Stibbe, 2015). Some stories are more dangerous than others (Kuletz, 1998) because of their seeming naturalness while simultaneously presenting a destructive discourse. Seeking to avoid Prometheus's fate, I argue for a shift to Gaeian discourse in our deliberations about the environment, discourse that is focused on the Earth as a system rather than a resource.

Viewing Earth as possessing agency does not mean viewing Earth as inherently positive, just as no construction of human agency is tantamount to saying that humans are inherently benevolent. In describing a new climatic regime, Latour (2017) reminds us that Earth is not benevolent. Earth is a force that is simultaneously generative and destructive. Language that affords the Earth agency does not offer a worshipful view of the planet, but rather a more modest view of humanity that seeks to create Earth-bound understandings of science, politics, and religion (Latour, 2017), thus furthering an environmental master frame. Such a master frame could create new stories-we-live-by (Stibbe, 2015). However, before we can create persuasive Gaeian narratives that allow for Gaeian discourse, we must have the language to build those narratives. Thus, as a place to start, I offer Earth-centered language, a critical mindedness to how our words construct the earth.

## 5.2. The Possibility of a Language-Shift

Language shifts are not new. For example, for years, people working in human service professions (e.g., social workers, psychologists, educators) advocated using *person-first* language when referring to people with disabilities (Johnson, 2000). (Note that the previous sentence is an example of person-first language: I wrote "people with disabilities" not "disabled people", which was the norm before person-first language took hold.) Eventually, the American Psychological Association (APA) revised its writing standards and (among other modifications) adopted person-first language, saying, "The overall principle for 'nonhandicapping' language is to maintain the integrity (worth) of all individuals as human beings. Avoid language that objectifies ... uses excessive and negative labels ... use people-first language" (APA, 2010, p. 76). Likening the call for Earth-centered

language to the usage of person-first language is not to weigh in on the debate about the usefulness of person-first language, as compared to identity-first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Some argue that person-first language perpetuates a dominant narrative of what it means to be a person, which leaves out the very people it seeks to include (e.g., saying “a person with disabilities” reinforces the view that a “whole person” does not have a disability, whereas saying “disabled person” foregrounds the person’s identity). Rather, person-first language is used here to demonstrate that language shifts can and do occur.

Earth-centered language may be helpful in achieving the goal of maintaining the integrity of the Earth. I purposely refer to the idea as “Earth-centered language” rather than “Earth-first language”, despite its inspiration from person-first language. I believe that rather than making the Earth the “first” consideration and then placing all other considerations in some rank order that may cause tension and foster debate, it is instead wise to center our language with an Earth-mindedness. Earth-centered language would thus be language that positions Earth as the element providing order and meaning, understanding that Earth cannot be substituted or eliminated—materially or discursively. Gaean discourse and Earth-centered language could be said to provide an environmental master frame (Eder, 1996), a frame that organizes other discourses. An environmental master frame would not only apply to traditional environmental issues (e.g., deforestation, pollution) but would view other matters—such as public policy, business administration, and theology—in light of their moral, empirical, and aesthetic environmental concerns (Eder, 1996).

### 5.3. Dirt Is a Dirty Word

Although Earth-centered language is not intended to become a new set of “politically correct” standards to police one’s self and others (how to practice a productive form of Earth-centered language is discussed later in this paper), it is still useful to examine how our everyday word choice constructs the Earth. To quote Whitehead, “We cannot be too suspicious of ordinary language” (as cited in Goatly, 2001, p. 203).

There are a host of commonly used words in the United States that contradict the spirit of Earth-centered language. Ordinary language is inadequately representing a livable ecopsophy for the world (Goatly, 2001). By first examining how some commonly used words are acting on Earth, I hope to establish the benefit of exploring new words, of using language differently.

The word “soil” is used as a noun to describe the upper layer of Earth but also as a verb to describe defiling something or making it unclean (“Soil”, 2018). Similarly, the word “weed” can be used as a noun to describe an undesirable plant. The classification of plants by humans into categories of desirable and undesirable is itself an interesting concept. The common daisy is considered a weed, despite being widely considered an attractive plant; its scientific name, *Bellis perennis*, translates as “pretty” (Latin: *bellus*) and “everlasting” (Latin: *perennis*). When used as a verb, “to weed” is to eradicate something noxious or useless



(“Weed”, 2018).

A good example of a word that is used mostly as a destructive metaphor is the word “dirt”. Consider that the word “dirt” is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (“Dirt”, 2018) as “excrement; unclean matter; anything worthless; scornful name for land; gossip, scandal; mud, soil, earth”. Yet, “dirt” was recently featured in *The New York Times Magazine* as a serious, albeit controversial, agent in addressing climate change by sequestering the carbon already in the atmosphere into useful compost that could also improve the nation’s food supply (Velasquez-Manoff, 2018). (Much like the discussion of Lovelock’s *Gaia*, it is beyond the scope of this paper to weigh in and take a side.)

How is it that the same word used to describe soil, silt, and clay materials is used to reference something as “worthless” or “unclean”? Further, what are the implications of referring to something as “dirty”? Why are earthly materials implicated in “filth”, even when the source of filth is human-induced? For example, if I were to get synthetic oil on my blouse as I topped off the oil in my car, I would label the blouse “dirty”. However, given that the chemical compounds are artificially produced by humans modifying petroleum and I spilled the oil on myself as I tried to refuel my human-built car, would not the stain be more aptly labeled “humany”?

“Dirt”, a naturally-occurring materiality of Earth, has come to be a metaphor we use to describe a state of undesirable un-cleanness. It is such an overused metaphor that, to paraphrase Kingsnorth and Hine (2009), we have forgotten it is a metaphor at all. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of the “dirt” metaphor is the way its usage maps *back* onto the Earth. Just as travel agencies and weather channels have convinced us that sunny is “good” and rainy is “bad” (Stibbe, 2015), chaining dirt and uncleanliness together discourages exploring nature, experiencing the feeling of Earth holding on to you as you lift your hiking boot from a patch of thick mud, and embracing its ecological role, as that “dirt” on your shoes contains seeds that you help to disperse.

#### 5.4. “No Man’s Land”

Is it possible that some of our language engages in “earthly slurs”? If we see the more-than-human world as having agency, it is. A slur is a “deliberate slight” (OED, 2018) typically used to disparage or insult. A slur, especially when uttered by a dominant group, can be considered an exertion of power, an attempt to construct the identity of another in a way that perpetuates the struggle between those in power and the subjects. We have “environmentally-hostile worldviews represented and conferred by text and language” (Goatly, 2001, p. 212). To paraphrase Stibbe (2015), some words are ecologically destructive. For example, one word that may qualify as a deliberate slight used to perpetuate human power over the Earth is “wasteland”, defined as “land in its natural, uncultivated state” or “land (esp. that which is surrounded by developed land) not used or unfit for cultivation or building and allowed to run wild” (OED, 2018). Here, I ask: Is the Sahara Desert a waste of land to the dromedary camels, spotted hyenas, scorpions, and cobras that

live there? If the Sahara Desert were to become cultivated by humans, and the many species of nonhuman animals that currently live there were displaced, would that land then be conserved, flourishing, and thriving (the antonyms of waste)?

In Kuletz's (1998) award-winning book, *The Tainted Desert*, she explores the effects of labelling an area of Earth as "wasteland". She states that the terms we use are politically motivated and offer representations of the Earth that wield great power. For example, the area around Yucca Mountain is dubbed a wasteland and therefore a permissible location to store nuclear waste, as well as engage in nuclear development and testing. The government takes a Promethean view of the land: Yucca Mountain is an inert, unused space and may be an ideal location to store "stolen fire", nuclear energy. Indigenous peoples afford Yucca Mountain "Puha", or power, vitality, life force (Kuletz, 1998). By constructing the area as a wasteland, not only is nonhuman life in the area ignored as having a vested interest in the area, but so are the lives of indigenous peoples for whom the land is sacred: an act of environmental racism is perpetrated (Kuletz, 1998). Once identified as a wasteland, license has been given to engage in actions that will fulfill the prophecy.

Thus, the first step in engaging in Earth-centered language is consciousness raising: realizing the impact of language on our ecological behaviors and attitudes. "We abuse land because we view it as a commodity belonging to us" (Leopold, 1949, p. viii). The next step is to adopt principles that permit Earth-centered language in everyday use. "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect" (Leopold, 1949, p. viii). Engaging in Earth-centered language is one way—an everyday practice—in which we can begin to see Earth as our community as we represent the more-than-human world with respect in words.

## 6. Earth-Centered Language: Acknowledging Our Response-Ability to Earth

Heretofore, the call for Earth-centered language to enable Gaean discourse has focused on raising awareness of how the English language (re)presents Earth. It is productive to offer some recommendations of how we move forward. It might seem that one path forward would be to provide a list of words to use, creating some "certified approved" designation granted by some organization deemed to be Earth-centered, which would dictate our language. However, such a list misses the spirit of the work done by ecolinguists, such as Abram (2017) and Stibbe (2015), which seeks to inspire care and creativity, not to make speaking or writing harder than it already is. Further, the point of Earth-centered language, and the ecosophy it rests on, is not to create a list of words that one can recite from rote memory. That would lead to an automaticity that is not useful. In addition, it is also possible to have an unmindfully positive view of Earth, which can generate lived and linguistic consequences of its own. The goal of Earth-centered language is to keep Earth in mind as we go about speaking and acting in the world. In this way, Earth-centered language can be likened to one explanation for the Jewish practice of keeping Kosher, that is, following Jewish dietary restrictions: Given that much of our waking hours involves food—from the

planning to the preparing to the eating—keeping Kosher is a way of keeping God on one’s mind all day, and a way to turn the everyday practice of eating into something with a purpose greater than satiating hunger. Similarly, adopting Earth-centered language is an attempt to keep an ecological mindset in our daily lives and to know that our language is more than stringing words together. To that end, I believe three guiding principles, which enable us to be mindful of how we construct the Earth, are a good starting place.

*Be honest and transparent.* Let us be honest in our depictions of the Earth and its role in our lives. Earth has the power to devastate. Many people live in harsh conditions, and even those who live in climates hospitable to human existence can lose their lives to a natural disaster. However, Earth often gets implicated where it has no “blame”, such as the example of the use of the word “dirt”. Let us disentangle “dirt” from a frame of worthlessness or uncleanness. When we get soil on our bodies or carpets or clothing, those items can truly be said to be “dirty”. When we get matter other than soil on our clothing, and we judge the clothing to be blemished by its presence, let us refer to the clothing as filthy, messy, or stained. Further, relating to the principle of honesty, let us be transparent in our selection of labels. In an effort to save face, we create labels that allow and justify our actions, such as the case of “wasteland”. The term’s existence affords a construction of landscape that reduces Earth to anthropocentric resource value. It is a term that begs to be unpacked whenever it is used, so that the motives of the label are made clear. If our discourse becomes Gaean, words like “wasteland” would trigger questions (waste of land for whom? Who decides a land’s worth? Who benefits from this land being considered wasted space?) rather than frames of desolation.

*Be kind.* It is past time we cease behaving in manners that suggest that humans live outside and separate from Earth as master manipulators. We should afford Earth and all its inhabitants some level of subjectivity, some agency (Abram, 2017; Kuletz, 1998; Stibbe, 2015). History, as well as scientific study (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Bastian & Haslam 2011; Viki, Osgood, & Phillips, 2013), has provided us myriad examples of the atrocities that humans are able to commit against one another when a population is out-grouped, othered, or dehumanized, when we fail to recognize one another’s basic right to existence and intrinsic worth. One way to avoid dehumanizing others is to have language that embraces heterogeneity and recognizes all subjects-of-lives as “sacred”: special, one-of-a-kind, unique, irreplaceable (Eisenberg, as cited in Stibbe, 2015, p. 167). “Language that increases the salience of individual people, animals, plants, forests, or rivers can help resist the tendency toward homogenization. It can build, in Eisenstein’s sense of the word, a sense of ‘sacredness’” (Stibbe, 2015, p. 167).

Finally, *be creative.* The first two suggestions are more explicit calls for re-minding, or demanding that something important that has been backgrounded be brought back into the foreground (Stibbe, 2015), the Earth. It is also possible to re-mind one’s self and others of the Earth in more subtle, artistic ways. Here, I echo the call of many other ecolinguists (The International Ecolinguistics Association, 2018) and say, “Create”. Our rhetoric may be its most didactic and persuasive when aesthetics are understood to be inseparable from

the goal of educating and/or influencing an audience (Peterson, 2001). The most well-crafted argument for Earth-centered language, without a compelling story, “misses the role beauty plays in assessments of rhetorical excellence” (Peterson, 2001, p. 22).

Individualization, personalization (such as that practiced in animal-centric anthropomorphism [de Waal, 2001; Milstein, 2011; Sowards, 2006]), and activated roles are all ways to artfully make the more-than-human world more salient in our language (Stibbe, 2015). Through individualization (i.e., representing a single, unique individual), the more-than-human world is recognized as subjects-of-a-life (Regan, 1983) and are found to have intrinsic worth. Although individualization is more commonly applied to nonhuman animals, one could also speak of a single, unique tree, recognizing the intrinsic worth of plants. Personalization goes a step further and offers vivid description of the individual. Activated roles portray nonhuman animals doing, thinking, feeling, and communicating things, rather than having things done to them (Stibbe, 2015). Again, although this is more typical in describing nonhuman animals, as we learn more about the lives of plants (Wohlleben, 2015), it becomes evident that they, too, should be activated in our language. And language need not be limited to the world of everyday discourse; rather, haikus, poetry, and the genre of New Nature writing offer inspiring examples of language used to create constructive narratives (Stibbe, 2015).

Returning to the example of a wasteland, consider the following haiku about a desert:

Desolate and hot. / Proud is the Joshua Tree. / Vast land of beauty. (Anonymous, 2013)

The haiku’s depiction of a desert affords agency. “Desolate” and “hot” activate our shared story of what a desert is—even without seeing the accompanying image of a desert, those five syllables could bring a desert scene to mind. However, rather than engaging the cultural evaluation of a desert (i.e., wasteland), the land is re-framed. The “Joshua Tree” is individualized and activated. The tree is named and described as a *be-ing*. And is the land wasted? No. It is vast and beautiful, not unlike an ocean. The haiku offers an example of using existing language to create new meaning.

Language is evolving, and where our existing language is inadequate to present a livable ecosophy, we can create new language (e.g., Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Haraway (2003, 2016) does not shy away from such creation in her scholarship. She urges us to tell stories that strengthen our response-abilities. Haraway (2016) describes response-ability as a collective “praxis of care and response ... in ongoing multispecies worlding” (p. 105). Poetry with more-than-human subjects and poetic natural science writing, photographs of individual animals that show them as agents, and jewelry made from recycled material that depict images of the more-the-human world in natural, non-anthropomorphized postures (such as may be found adorning the shelves of gift shops of science centers) are all aesthetically-pleasing rhetoric that create a constructive ecosophy. We have a response-ability to put art back into Earth.

## 7. The Radical Hope of Earth-Centered Language

Humans seem to possess an unparalleled facility for language in the animal kingdom. Our linguistic capability is a remarkable characteristic, and its contributions to our species cannot be overstated. I am suggesting that we make the most of our words and use our language to assist in correcting our current course.

Promethean discourse—the stories, the language—creates frames for viewing the Earth as a resource and favors the values of neoliberalism (e.g., growth and expansion as good). Gaean discourse, afforded partially through the adoption of Earth-centered language, seeks to (re)position the Earth/Gaea as the organizing structure of language by urging people to evaluate critically their choice of words. The argument offered through this paper is that the adoption of Earth-centered language is a necessary but insufficient cause for Gaean discourse. Using language that is respectful of Earth is offered as a starting point for establishing dialogue that is respectful of Earth.

There are several future directions that could advance the idea of, and argument for, Earth-centered language. First, an interdisciplinary analysis of the existing Promethean discourse would benefit an argument for Gaean discourse. Such an analysis would include what psychologists see as the cognitive payoffs or rewards for engaging in Promethean discourse and how Gaean discourse could be constructed to offer comparable cognitive rewards. Theologians, economists, scientists, and political scientists could all offer similar analyses of the role Promethean discourse has played in their fields and how Gaean discourse would have to be articulated to counterbalance Promethean discourse. Second, a multi-lingual and cultural analysis would offer insight as to how Promethean discourse may (or may not) play out in languages other than English and in cultures other than Western capitalistic society. Third, more suggestions on how to be mindful of Earth in our everyday language would be useful.

It may seem like an uphill battle—a Sisyphean task—to attempt to argue for Earth-centered language. Indeed, it may seem like a radical idea. But consider the first definition of the word “radical” offered by the Oxford English Dictionary (“Radical”, 2018): “of, belonging to, or from a root ... fundamental to or inherent in the natural processes of life, vital.” A radical idea may be exactly what is needed to untie ourselves from Prometheus’ rock.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land” is from the first line of T. S. Eliot’s (1922) “*The Waste Land*”.

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