

rc news

The Language Of



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{from the director}

And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there... And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children built. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth."

"THE TOWER OF BABEL" DOES NOT ACTUALLY APPEAR IN THE BIBLE. Yet this fully evocative phrase has become the shorthand for a number of related concepts. Among these are the problem of hubris, the complexity of human languages and the concomitant challenges of translation, the joys and perils of urbanism—for the cityscape is an essential component of the tale—and the power of human ingenuity.

A linguistically united human community—the descendants of survivors of the Great Flood who have journeyed together from the East—are motivated by alluring dreams and desires. They seek to build a city and a tower "whose top may reach unto heaven." They want to craft a name for themselves, to be remembered, to make a mark and then render it permanent in stone, brick and mortar. But there is a risk

"We're able to listen, argue and debate... and move ahead—getting on with the business of teaching and learning..."

here that God/the Lord identifies. The supposition is if they succeed in this great venture then they will lose all sense of proportion and constraint, and, quite literally, "nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do."

This deeply disturbing story is surprisingly useful to recall at the launch of a new endeavor, especially for those of us who interpret it as a cautionary tale about hubris. Hubris is always, in the end, about pride and arrogance; it denotes, too, a loss of contact with reality and an overestimation of one's own competence or capabilities. Hubris is particularly relevant for people in positions of power over others. Those who are overly dazzled by their own imaginings and who glory in the exercise of power for its own sake can become a danger

to themselves and a hazard to others. Might does not always make right; just because you can, doesn't mean you should. Or, as the great James Baldwin observed, the relationship of morality and power is a subtle one, "because ultimately power without morality is no longer power."

We are, together, beginning new things at the RC. We are at the start of another new academic year, one that promises a host of changes and challenges and opportunities. This year commences a three-year cycle of pruning and packing, of leaving the East Quad for temporary digs in the West Quad, and of returning in the third year to newly renovated and upgraded spaces in our EQ home. In our mind's eye some of us have conceptualized these events in the epic terms of Exodus and Odyssey, artfully transforming the mundane navigation of hundreds of small details into an imposing narrative structure.

We are anxious to set off and we want to do so in the right way, as an intentional community and in ways that avoid the sin of hubris. As we create the future we want to be careful to honor our past and to reflect on the history that continues to sustain us. We want to share information and to ensure as participatory a culture as possible in preparing for the move to West Quad. We will be calling on all members of this community in myriad ways over the next weeks and months, beginning with our Convocation and Mass Meeting on September 9th. We'll be unveiling, for the first time publicly, some of the proposed designs for the new EQ, and some of the plans for our year away. Ultimately, we hope that this process, at once grand and quotidian, will elicit new opportunities for reaffirming principles and practices that have guided us for the last 43 years.

In the first several weeks of my directorship I have begun to learn more about and to hold close those qualities that have long made this a distinctive institution. I value the

{from the director}

history of the RC. And while I cannot count myself among those early generations of professors and students who dedicated themselves to the sorts of educational experimentation that brought the RC into existence in the late 1960s, I am a direct, “second generation” beneficiary of this pedagogical approach. As an undergraduate, I was enrolled in the living-learning community of James Madison College at Michigan State University in the 1980s. As a younger professor I taught at NYU’s Gallatin School of Individualized Study. While not at all residential, Gallatin was started in 1972 as a “university without walls,” embracing what was then the non-traditional and cutting-edge assumption that students have the right to own and direct their education.

James Madison and Gallatin, like the RC, have prided themselves on fashioning student-centered learning environments that accentuate creativity and intellectual exploration. All three institutions promote close connections between faculty and undergraduates, the freedom to chart one’s own distinctive path, and the responsibility for defending one’s choices. Hence, for me, coming to the RC five years ago was like returning to an old and familiar neighborhood.

Having experienced this style of education as an undergraduate and as a faculty member, I am absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to view it from the vantage point of the Director’s office. In this I follow in the footsteps of James Roberston, Marc Ross, John Mersereau, Libby Douvan, Herb Eagle, Tom Weisskopf, and of course Charles Bright. They have set the bar high, which is where bars should be.

I want to once again thank Charlie for his five and a half years of service in an administrative capacity and for all he has done in the past three decades as a member of this faculty. In word and deed Charlie has taught me that we don’t need to speak one language in order to succeed. Administrative work at its best is creative and generative; it thrives in a context of openness to differences of opinion, style, belief and talents. Charlie and his predecessors have bequeathed to me and to us all a community that revels in the diversity of language, both literally and figuratively. An organized Babel reigns around lunch tables and coffee hours, in classrooms and corridors of East Quad. In a broader and less literal sense, we don’t all have to agree to be able to move in the same direction and dance to synchronized beats. We’re able to listen, argue, and debate; to unite when necessary, retreat when desired, knock each other down, pick each



PHOTO BY CYNTHIA BURTON

other up, and move ahead -- getting on with the business of teaching and learning and exploring new frontiers.

This issue of the RC News is about language, and we will be thinking about language all year. You are welcome to join us as we ponder what to call the new “frontiers” that lay immediately ahead, as we prepare to pack up the college and travel to our temporary facilities across campus. Are “Exodus” and “Odyssey” really appropriate demarcations? Would there be political and ethical concerns about adopting the language of exile and homelessness? We want to be attentive to the politics of language, and the language of politics as well. Whatever we call the three-year cycle of change and continuity that will take us away from the East Quad and back again, it’s bound to be exhilarating. ■

The Residential College (RC) is a 4-year, interdisciplinary, living-learning community of 1,000 undergraduates established through the University of Michigan’s College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) in 1967. The distinctive educational mission of the RC is to enable students to develop their intellectual interests and creative talents in an environment in which they can find their own voice and relate learning with doing. The RC faculty and staff challenge students to take the initiative in shaping their own education, to participate actively in classes and in extra-curricular programs, to think critically about what they are learning and reflectively about what they are doing, and to engage with the University community as well as the outside world. Learn more at: <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rc>.



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EXPLORING

LANGUAGE GEGE



THE LANGUAGE OF...

“Language is an effective arrangement of
the world’s enigmatic abundance”

Jorge Luis Borges

Every fall, the Residential College asks its incoming class—as well as students, faculty and staff—to read something in common. Usually these readings are linked to the LSA theme semester in the upcoming academic year.

We invite you to join us in the RC Community Read centered around the Winter 2012 LSA theme semester: “Language: The Human Quintessence”. We will be reading two short stories by Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges: “The Library of Babel” and “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” will be assimilated into many of the RC First Year Seminar curricula. The RC will host lectures and other events which will examine these stories, contributing to the campus-wide language on Language.

We also asked RC faculty to think about the languages of their own disciplines and to write about them. The various languages that we speak are very much on display in this issue of the RC News, and epitomize our community of diversity. In the pages that follow, some of our faculty pose their own questions about language and about the power to decide whose language has power and whose does not.

After the manner of the RC Language Programs, we entreat you to immerse yourself in these languages that you may or may not currently possess: line, music, numbers, ecology, community engagement, and finally, the language of all languages spoken at once: babble. ■

Please email Cynthia Burton at caburton@umich.edu to request a copy of the Borges short stories and study questions created by RC faculty.



{special section}

THE LANGUAGE OF

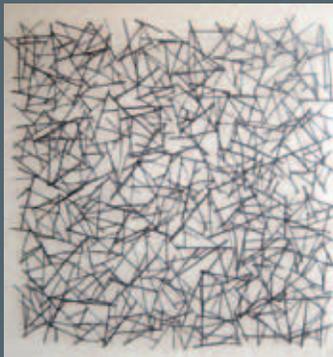
LINE

BY LARRY CRESSMAN

I ONCE READ IN A TEXT ON DRAWING THAT “LINE DOESN’T EXIST IN NATURE”.

This statement seemed strange to me—especially having been surrounded by the Michigan landscape for most of my life. Lines are everywhere—black lines and gray shadows cast on the white surface of snow for much of any given year. This linear landscape has certainly impacted and influenced the direction my work has taken. Line has consistently been the driving force—the ‘object’ and ‘language’ of my work for most of my artistic career. How did I come to this?

Early on in my drawing, I began to experience a frustration with the flatness of paper. Creating the illusion of space within the two-dimensional surface seemed too limiting. An intuitive need arose to bring my drawing out into the world, to pull the drawn line off the surface—to make it physical—essentially, to make it real. Cutting, tearing, collaging all became prominent activities, as I edged into three-dimensions. I began to generate fragments, bits and pieces of paper, as I cut up and restructured past work. This accumulation became a resource for new work and from this resource came thin strips of graphite-coated paper—line. This was not a line that alluded to space within the surface of paper, but line I could hold in my hand: a line that could exist on its own, freed from the flatness of the plane. Essentially, I had reduced my work to the most basic element of art: line.



This was a challenging place to be with my work, but I sensed that it also offered great potential and great freedom. I was no longer bound by ‘flat’, or by the borders of a sheet of paper. My drawings could be any size, and were only limited by the space in which they were placed.

I began to experiment by constructing drawings as collections of lines gathered into transparent envelopes. I wove lines through holes punctured in paper. Finally released from the two-dimensional surface of paper, I realized I could pin lines in gestural composition directly on gallery walls—creating large line “drawings” that responded to the architectural space, animated by light and shadow.

These drawings often lived only for the duration of an exhibit. Embracing the temporary nature of this work introduced another level of freedom, and allowed me to consider the use of ephemeral materials such as sticks, wire, rubber, glass, even sound. Most importantly, I began to use sticks: raspberry branches, dogbane twigs and daylily stalks—lines directly from the Michigan landscape and laden with gestural potential.

I continue to be drawn to these specific lines for their physical structure, their fragile nature and their expressive qualities as I create installation drawings that attempt a linear balance between structure and order—to use the “language of line” to communicate a sense of the environment in which we live. ■

LARRY CRESSMAN teaches in the RC Studio Arts Program.
Photo: “Gesture Drawing” installation by Larry Cressman, media: graphite on daylily stalks.

{special section}

I'M LOOKING AT THIS ONE-PANEL CARTOON BY SIDNEY HARRIS... FUNNY IN A GEEKY SORT OF WAY. A Neanderthal is sitting on his haunches, his back resting against a rock. His left hand is open, fingers splayed. With his right pointer finger he's counting his left digits. The word balloon reads "1, 2 ... many." Surely he sees all his fingers; he simply doesn't have a word for exactly how many he sees—the perils of a limited number vocabulary. Perhaps he'll invent "three" next week!

The Mundurucu are one of the most powerful tribes along the Amazon in South America. Nearly eleven thousand Mundurucu are estimated to reside in isolated villages deep in the jungle. Like all humans, they engage in numeric and geometric calculations on a daily basis. Yet their specific number language ends with their variant of "five."

They have a word for "few" and one for "many" (after all, even the cartoon Neanderthal could voice "many"), and in practice it's clear they've developed an effective language-independent understanding of quantity. Their process is slow and approximate (much like our practice of rounding), but they spontaneously apply concepts of addition, subtraction, and comparison. They have a word for "circle" but no word for "rectangle," "square," or "triangle." In recent tests of basic geometry and map readings skills, Mundurucu children scored comparable to U.S. children (and Mundurucu adults scored only slightly lower than U.S. adults). Anthropologists and cultural linguists are fascinated and entranced by this tribe (U.S. educators probably less so).

These results seem to suggest that mathematics taps into an innate human understanding that might be hindered by limited vocabulary but certainly not prevented by the absence of "seventeen." There's no question that as language expands, so expand the possibilities of all forms of communications (and hence understanding). Subtle ideas—whether mathematical or philosophical—thrive in a language-rich environment. John Buchanan's 1929 book, *Poetry and Mathematics*, perceptively links two of man's greatest linguistic achievements: "Very simply, poetry and mathematics are two very successful attempts to deal with ideas." Any society is poorer without either, and the love for one may not differ much from the love for the other.

Limited vocabulary is not the only possible impediment in the language of numbers. Dyscalculia (somewhat akin to dyslexia) is an uncommon, but genetic, inability to grasp and manipulate even basic numbers. Affecting from one to seven percent of the population, dyscalculia can prevent a person from recognizing (without directly counting) a small group of objects. Most human adults can recognize five or more objects; people with dyscalculia have access to the word but simply do not readily perceive "five."

For many years to come the Mundurucu will surely provide us with insights into language, cognitive processing, and the development of quantitative reasoning. I confess I'm curious to read some of their poetry. ■

THE LANGUAGE OF

NUMBERS

BY DAVID BURKAM



DAVID BURKAM teaches in the RC Social Science program.

{special section}

THE LANGUAGE OF
**community
engagement**

when to listen and when to talk BY DEB GORDON-GURFINKEL

STUDENTS THAT TAKE THE CLASS “EMPOWERING COMMUNITY THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION” LEARN that our goal is to listen to what others have to say and to collaborate in constructing creative vehicles as a platform. We rephrase the notion of “giving a voice” by focusing on the platform for existing voices. The implication that the RC class members (mostly white, mostly middle class and mostly good communicators) are providing the communities that we engage with (mostly black, mostly poor, mostly in struggling schools, possibly learning disabled, mostly lacking in

self-confidence), with a language of communication is misleading and could be viewed as patronizing. The language of civic engagement is that of a willingness to learn from each other by sharing stories and to know how to respectfully enter and then exit the community with which we are engaged. We are visitors, eager to work in collaboration.

The RC course is taught collaboratively with Kate Mendeloff (RC), Rich Tolman (School of Social Work) and myself and has been part of the RC landscape in one form or another for the past six years. Both undergraduate and

PHOTO BY LEISA THOMPSON



{special section}

graduate students that take the class meet with the teaching team once a week and select an internship at an arts-based program in Ypsilanti, Detroit or Ann Arbor that they also attend weekly. At the community-based programs, the students have varying responsibilities including planning and leading supervised sessions with the participants. I founded and direct one of those programs, Telling It, which has four sites and works with K-12 students that are high-risk to fail in school. We intersect the arts with creative writing to promote scholastic and self-confidence. U-M students can also intern with Mosaic Theater, U-M's Best Buddies and have interned at the Neutral Zone and 826 Michigan.

One of the texts that we use in the course is Lisa Delpit's "The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom," 2002. Both Delpit and Carole D. Lee, another advocate for the authentic voice of the participants, maintain that the vernacular of young people should be acknowledged in the classroom in order to counter the message that non-standard language is associated with low expectations for minority and low-income students. (1) Children and youth, and indeed most of us, are experts in code-switching our language. The Telling It model works with and not in tension with existing speech patterns of the youth, seeing them as coming to the experience with a wealth of knowledge. Therefore, in the Telling It program with the high school youth we use no restrictions on subject matter and less language restrictions than are common in a traditional classroom. As Delpit states, ". . . our language plays an equally pivotal role in determining who we are: it is 'The Skin That We Speak.'" (2) Excluding hate language and overt rudeness, Telling It youth talk and write in their authentic voices. For the U-M students this can take some getting used to, although the weekly RC class sessions support this same environment. We model the engaged-learning style that is happening at some of the internships and students often reveal their personal stories in their authentic voice. Their weekly written reflections occasionally echo that same raw language.

In my twenty-five years of community-based practice I have come across those who support this pedagogical approach and those that do not. Interestingly, it has never been the directors of the programs that I serve that have had a problem with the freedom of language I promote nor have

the partnering social workers or teachers. Those who have had concerns are those who have not been in the sessions but have heard about them. The U-M students routinely comment on how the teens gradually cease to use swear words or use them sparingly or only when nothing else will work in their creative writing. Given this license, the youth are then very comfortable with editing their pieces for our end of term presentations, even taking it upon themselves to check in with their Principal as happened this past semester. They learn that they are responsible for their language and need to take ownership of every word they create. As one of the Principals said to me, "The day you don't produce results is the day I can no longer support this kind of language." Communicating can be a tricky business that has to navigate racial, class and ethnic divides. It's not essential that we speak the same language but it is important that we make the effort to understand each other. ■



PHOTO BY LEISA THOMPSON

DEB GORDON-GURFINKEL is the Head of the Telling It program.

1.) Lee, Carol D. (2007) *Culture, Literacy, and Learning: Taking Bloom in the Midst of the Whirlwind*. Teachers College Press Columbia University: New York, p.25
2.) Delpit, Lisa, Dowdy, Joanne K. (2002) *The Skin That We Speak: Thoughts on Language and Culture in the Classroom*. New Press: New York, p. xvii.

THE LANGUAGE OF

music

BY KATRI ERVAMAA

MUSICAL SYNTAX HAS LETTERS (NOTES) THAT FORM WORDS (MOTIFS) THAT FORM COHERENT SENTENCE STRUCTURES (PHRASES). Harmony (chord changes and keys) and melody work together to create form. Music theory teaches the grammar; composition and improvisation the conversation; music reading the text comprehension and interpretation. Musicians learn music the same way we learn a spoken language: by memorizing the rules, drilling the parts, and immersing ourselves in the practice.

As a performer who specializes in new music (narrowly defined as newly composed classical art music), I encounter and learn a new language every time I start learning a new piece. Indeed, it is one of the great challenges for modern composers: each must find their own compositional language, then stay true to it while being inventive and creative. Sometimes this language can be tonal (think of tonality as the “Latin” of music, a mother-language on which many other languages are based), and sometimes not. It can even be like the Fenno-Ugric languages—not related to any other language and spoken by very few people in the world. I find that the more musical languages I know, the easier it is to learn new ones.

It is also very interesting to me how musical dialects differ.

Recently I’ve been fortunate to talk with three different fiddle players about how they achieve their sound, and the differences in the sound production of fiddling versus classical violin playing. My goal has been to stop myself from sounding so completely classical (i.e. square) on the cello when playing alternative styles. What I discovered was that each of the three fiddle players’ techniques were in fact quite

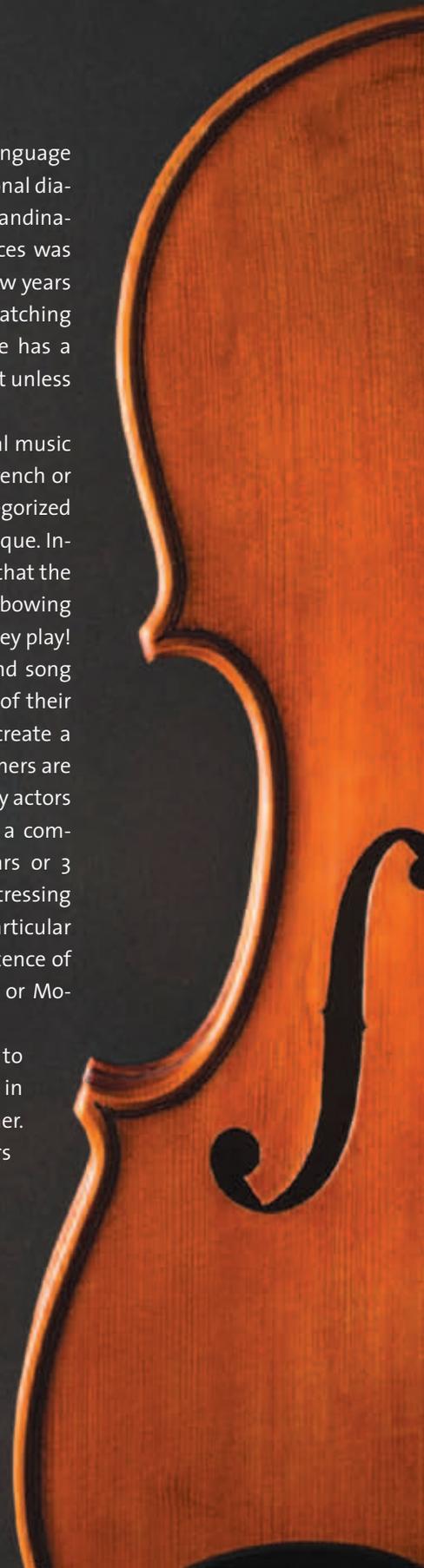
different: they were speaking the same language (Celtic fiddling) but with a different regional dialect (Northern Irish, Newfoundlander, Scandinavian). The moment I heard the differences was exactly like the moment when, after a few years of living in the US and ten years into watching the “Golden Girls”, I heard that Blanche has a Southern accent. You can’t hear an accent unless you’re fluent in the language!

This used to be the case with classical music as well: people used to talk about the French or the Russian School of cello playing, categorized by the idiosyncratic details of the technique. Interestingly, I’ve even heard it speculated that the mother tongue affects a string player’s bowing technique and the ‘accent’ with which they play!

Like a poet or a writer, composers and songwriters often toy with the expectations of their audience and make a sudden shift to create a response in the listener. Classical performers are interpretive artists much in the same way actors are: they interpret the text/music that a composer/playwright wrote down 300 years or 3 days ago. It is easy to understand how stressing one word over another, or pausing at a particular moment changes the meaning of a sentence of Shakespeare. The same is true for Bach or Mozart or Beethoven.

The RC Music Department aims to empower a life-long quest of learning in music, whatever the level of the learner. The process is infinite: as soon as your ears can hear something, your technique can start catching up. I often find that once I catch up to my ears I have great fun for a few days, and then my ears hear something new and the process starts all over again. ■

KATRI ERVAMAA is a cellist and Head of the RC Music program.



Words ought to be a little wild, for they are the assault of thoughts upon the unthinking. John Maynard Keynes

THE LANGUAGE OF

ECOLOGY

BY VIRGINIA MURPHY

FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY, we have used words to convey our fear, hope, and admiration for the environment. The stories we tell, in literature, poetry, and memoir, demonstrate not also the evolving role of language but also the evolution of our relationship to the earth.

The voyagers on the *Mayflower* described their promised land as a “hideous and desolate wilderness”¹ replete with dark forests and lurking savages. Such a landscape would require civilizing to ensure the settlers’ survival. Western pioneer accounts also describe the vast and wooded country as an enemy that must be tamed.² Yet, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson sought to vindicate the New World’s natural attributes against European dismissal of the country. His writing became a framework for the exalting of the frontier West and a celebration of the environment.

During the 19th century, American writers traveled west along with surveyors and landscape artists and returned with stories about the abundance and beauty of the natural lands. James Fenimore Cooper’s protagonist, Natty Bumppo, believed in “the honesty of the woods,”³ while other contemporary novelists wrote with awe about the American wilderness. William Cullen Bryant’s poem *Thanatopsis* was one of the earliest representations of an American poetry that revels in the “continuous woods”⁴ of the new Nation. Thomas Cole’s belief that “pleasures spring like flowers within the bosom of the wilderness”⁵ also furthered Jefferson’s ideal of American nationalism.

Jefferson’s passions were later epitomized by the conservation movement and reflected in the writings of John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson. With each re-evaluation of the environment, public opinion morphed. Early environmental literature allowed the public access to a language that gave expression to their desire for nature, and breathed life into the awesome feelings that we hold for the natural world.

How we think, talk, and write about the natural world influences our behavior toward the environment. The words we

choose influence how we process ideas just as the literature we read informs our ability to understand environmental information. It is within this ecology of language that the catalyst for a more sustainable relationship with our habitat resides.

In the modern study of the environment, words often separate and antagonize. As the environmental movement evolved, the idealistic and Romantic terms used to underscore the need for conservation seemed quaint and unrealistic. In the face of unprecedented energy demands, environmental proponents became tree-hugging granola eaters. When the Clean Water Act was passed in 1972, it focused on restoring our rivers and streams so that they would again be fishable and swimmable, a far cry from the mighty Shenandoah of Jefferson’s day, but understandable after the chemical-laden Cuyahoga River burst into flames.

Our current terminology for the protection of the environment has little to do with its beauty; we rely more on valuation of ecological resources for economic purposes, rather than valuing ecological systems for their own sake. This change in values—nature as commodity—is also evidenced in our language as the paradigm of economic thinking replaces a conservation land ethic, and supports an unsustainable goal of continuous and limitless economic growth. Our economy seeks indefinite growth, but an ecosystem is cyclical and unpredictable; it does not respond to market values.

A sustainable future requires that we reject over-optimistic and over-simplified views of resource use in favor of a return to a language where the true and natural value of our ecology is celebrated, a vernacular that speaks honestly about sustainable practices and the limits we must all soon recognize. In order to better articulate our commitment to a sustainable ecosystem we need to change our thinking to encompass multiple systems of value. As teachers and students, it is our duty to bequeath a language that both reflects our understanding of the natural world and becomes the foundation for teaching our descendants how to live well on a finite earth. ■

VIRGINIA MURPHY teaches in the RC Social Science and First-Year Seminar programs.

1 William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1952), p. 62.

2 Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 2001), p. 27.

3 James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, (New York, 1912), p. 302.

4 *The Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant*, ed. Parke Godwin (New York, 1883), p. 19.

5 Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, ed. Elliott S. Vesell (Cambridge, MA., 1964), p. 40.

{special section}

THE LANGUAGE OF

BABBLE

BY HELEN FOX

ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT, “THE WHOLE EARTH HAD ONE LANGUAGE AND FEW WORDS.” All of that changed when an ambitious, artistic people, migrating to Mesopotamia from somewhere to the east, decided to build a city, complete with a tower “with its top in the heavens” in order to make a name for themselves. According to archeologists, it is likely that the real Tower of Babel was enameled in brilliant blue, and its spiral terraces graced with flowers and trees— which must have been quite a sight in 600 BCE.

However, God was not pleased.

“And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’” (Genesis 11)

So to endow humans with humility, perhaps, God destroyed the beautiful, blue-enameled mud-brick tower and scattered the people over the face of the earth. But of course that was not the end of the story. Although communication was no longer effortless (as it must have been when language consisted of “few words”), humans had also been gifted with intelligence, curiosity, and the capacity to learn each other’s languages—quite effortlessly if accomplished in early childhood.

Humans have since invented all sorts of devious methods to break through the “babble” of many languages: the arts of translation and interpretation; the compiling of dictionaries; the various attempts at common languages like Esperanto (or even mathematics and music); the creation of trade languages jointly constructed by the early explorers and the people they encountered, as well as the violent imposition of dominant languages on captive populations; the diffusion of dominant languages through the “soft power” of education and language legislation; the “othering” of speakers and writers of “lesser” language varieties by referring to them as “slang” or “sloppy” versions of the dominant.

About half of the world’s currently spoken languages are expected to disappear in this century, and with them, complex cultural histories, medicinal and ecological knowledge, and important insights into the human condition. Yet the spread of English, currently the dominant language of commerce, science, and much popular culture, has not resulted in the uniformity and mutual intelligibility that some expected. So many varieties of English are now spoken in cultures around the world that it is more accurate to speak of “World Englishes,” rather than “Standard” English or “The King’s English” or “Broadcast English”—as if one dialect or variety or accent or style were better, or even more “correct” than any other. Is all this language diversity a curse or a blessing in today’s global society?

Let’s talk about it! ■

HELEN FOX teaches in the RC Social Science Program and advises for the Peace and Social Justice Minor.

Parting Words from Charlie Bright



PHOTO BY LEISA THOMPSON

SIX YEARS AGO, WHEN I AGREED TO BECOME RC DIRECTOR, I THOUGHT I KNEW WHAT I WAS GETTING INTO. After (or before) all, I'd been around the college for thirty years; I had watched my good friend, Tom Weisskopf, in the chair; and I had already done an interim year myself in 2001-2, during which I had been deeply involved in de-

veloping the “long-range plan” for the Residential College. Little did I know....

I had three general goals coming in. Renewing and strengthening the RC community was a high priority. The heart of the RC is its residential community of learners. The composition of the faculty was (and still is) undergoing deep change, as an elder cadre of instructors (including myself) move toward retirement and opportunities open for bringing in new and younger colleagues—folks who bring renewed energy and new directions to our collective project. Students have also been changing, bringing a flood of technologies and new social practices into the mix. Putting the learning into the living has been our lodestar of success for years, but keeping the residential and the college in productive synergy has always required continual experiment and change. We've had 18 new colleagues join our faculty over the last quinquennium; Angela Dillard, our new Director, is among their number. They have played a leading role in re-thinking elements of our curriculum and in developing new academic minors as part of what the RC offers. Several talented cohorts of undergraduates have also passed through in these years, revitalizing the student community with initiatives like the Republic, the forums, new recruitment strategies, and civic engagement initiatives. In the middle of this period, the 40th Anniversary celebration brought former and current students together for a rousing weekend of remembrance and renewal—charting the course of this amazing community for another forty years.

The vitality of the RC community depends on it being open to the wider world. Communication and connection with others, on campus and in surrounding communities, amplify opportunities for student learning and re-stoke the internal

energy of the college. In recent years, we've worked hard to make ourselves more visible and also more open to others. With the abundant generosity of members of our community, we were able to establish an endowment (named after RC founding father, Don Brown and his wife, June) to put students in the world; it now helps fund travel abroad for 40-60 students a year. We established a series of learning projects in surrounding communities—the Spanish Language Internship program, “Telling It”, PALMA, Semester in Detroit, among others—to take our students out of the classroom to learn lessons that they bring back to the RC community. This year our civic engagement initiatives received an award from the Dean for their contributions to the LSA's ‘undergraduate initiative’. And we have now opened all our courses and

Our wanderings in the wilderness of renovation will be made possible thanks to the ties and connections we have established across campus....

minors—and this year our majors as well—to LSA students, embedding the Drama and Creative Writing majors and our undergraduate minors in cross-campus alliances as we go. By making the RC community accessible to others, we bring new energy into the learning community and we strengthen its commitment to the worlds around us.

My third goal was related to both community building and outreach. The decrepit condition of East Quad had a material impact on community life and on the RC's ability to recruit students—especially in a period when other colleges were upgrading residential offerings and other dorms on this campus were being renovated. A physical renewal of the RC facility required determined lobbying to get our needs noticed and, in an era of tight budgets, we had to get serious about raising external funds. LSA Development became our principal ally in the last five years—helping us land substantial gifts to transform the RC auditorium into the RC Keene Theater and to underwrite studio upgrades. The Dean's office funded improvements in the main RC offices and helped to

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{charlie bright}

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PHOTO BY LEISA THOMPSON

cultivate donors. Last year, East Quad was suddenly added to the queue for a major overhaul of both its residential and academic facilities—and the LSA Dean has now committed \$18 million to this project.

And this brings us to the next major challenge. In May 2012, East Quad will go off line and we will all have to move out for a full academic year—and more. This will be a test of the strengths and cohesion of

the RC community, as we become separated for a time from the residence hall that has defined the college for forty years. It will also offer opportunities for innovation and exploration

and provide us with insights into what holds us together. Our wanderings in the wilderness of renovation will be made possible thanks to the ties and connections we have established across campus, and we will work with University Housing and campus facilities people to ensure effective programming for our students as we work to keep the residential and the college productively bound together.

Architectural planning for the renovation of East Quad is nearly complete; Angela and I have been tag-teaming the meetings for several months now and many of our faculty have been involved. Next comes the planning for the year out of East Quad. Angela brings fresh insights and creativity to this task—she’s a capable leader, fully in tune with the RC mission—and I can think of no one I’d rather see direct our fortunes in the coming phase than our new Director. All my best wishes to her—and to you all. ■



Social Inequality and the Prospects for Equity and Sustainability in Southeastern Michigan: An Interdisciplinary Faculty Hiring Initiative

The Residential College, the Department of Afroamerican & African Studies, the Department of Sociology, the Urban and Regional Planning Program in Taubman College, and the School of Social Work propose a cluster in urban studies with particular attention to social inequality and the prospects for equity and sustainability. The cluster, representing a combination of disciplines in the liberal arts and professional schools, will nurture an interdisciplinary research team working on issues relevant to the urban condition broadly defined—such as community infrastructure, sustainable development, and the built environment—but with a particular focus on questions of inequality, including unequal access to goods and services ranging from education and health care to transportation and employment, to intangible forms of social capital, and to the relationships between the urban core and the suburban ring.

While the specific research topics may vary widely, we propose that this cluster focus its primary attention on Detroit and the southeast Michigan region, both urban

and metropolitan. We believe that a regional emphasis on the conditions and problems confronting populations in southeast Michigan will provide much of the glue for this cross-disciplinary and cross-school cluster. Detroit and the penumbra of communities surrounding it have long been at the forefront of urban developments—as the paragon of heavy industrial concentration, as the seat of racial conflict and white flight, and now, as a pioneer in the landscape of post-industrialism.

Indeed we envision the creation of a “Detroit School” of urban studies. For if this region is, in many ways, paradigmatic of new conditions of urban life, it also poses questions that older schools of urban studies no longer adequately address. The major breakthroughs in urban studies have tended to occur when groups of scholars work together in loose association but with a focus on the cumulative understanding of a particular geography.

You can read the entire Initiative on the RC website: <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/rc>. ■



PHOTO BY LEISA THOMPSON

Thank you for supporting the RC!

Many thanks to those of you who have contributed to the RC this past year. Your gift is making an immediate difference, enabling students to build foreign language skills and to engage in learning outside the classroom, both in the communities surrounding the campus and in study and projects abroad. We've also enjoyed the notes of support and encouragement; please keep those coming!

As we prepare for the renovation of East Quad and move toward an adventure with novel challenges and fresh opportunities, we require a little more help from our alumni and friends. Please consider making a gift to the RC's strategic fund. Your donation will assist us as we begin the three-year cycle of packing and moving, being away for a year, and then returning home. These funds will be used for everything from hiring students to assist with packing faculty offices to finding inventive ways to promote community-building activities. Your contribution will ensure the continued health and stability of the RC community, both present and future.

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