

## *Of Blackberries and the Poetic Commons*

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“*Rubus*’s habits are also democratic”  
—Lisa Robertson

1.

The blackberry I have in mind is not the catchily-named communications gadget, with its techno-utopian promises of “staying connected” and “mobilizing the workplace” (one is tempted to conjure the spectre of Marx, here, text-messaging Engels). This blackberry is part of capital’s attempt to appropriate the discourse of the commons—to enclose all leisure and extraneous time so that there can be nowhere where one can be “unconnected” to capitalism’s flow of information. No, the blackberry I have in mind today is none other than the humble fruit and bramble so common and pervasive in the Pacific North West—the *rubus armeniacus*, or Himalayan blackberry, brought to North America by California horticulturalist Luther Burbank in 1885 and now running amok in urban and suburban spaces alike. And yet, while my blackberry and the technological one might seem polar opposites at first glance, they do share a few features. They are both based on principles of “connectivity,” and they both provide kinds of “information,” promising sustenance and the good life. They are both, however, potentially invasive, and hard to get rid of once they have taken root.

I have, in this paper, really only one basic objective: to present a few images and examples of ready and already-existing commons—and to suggest the ways in which these commons interact with, and exist along the seams and in the lacunae of, capital. We are surrounded by, and inundated with, images (and the discourse) of private property—the electronic “blackberry” being one example (*your* “blackberry”—personal and private—keeping *you* connected to the world so disconnectedly other). We cannot avoid them, or avoid thinking through and with them. To begin seriously discussing alternatives

to capitalism, I propose simply that we need also to have on hand images of alternative modes of economic and social relations—examples of other formations of our “species being”—with which we can begin to think and interact.

In part I am directed here by David Harvey’s argument in *Spaces of Hope*. Harvey, noting the problems for the imagination of alternate social worlds posed by the Marxist analysis of the relation between base and superstructure—if culture is formed solely by the modes of production, then how can culture envision alternative modes and relations of production—Harvey proposes that in fact “All capitalist ventures must exist in the imagination before they are realized in the market” (204). Harvey continues: “If such fictions and imaginary elements [as direct and fire capitalist activity] surround us at every turn, then the possibility also exists of ‘growing’ imaginary alternatives within its midst” (206). The point is that everything in the human world involves the imaginary. Thus my starting point is with such “imaginary alternatives” already growing in our midst. Thus, the blackberry.

**[image 1]**

2.

Blackberry brambles are the marginalia of the urban and suburban city/text. Occupying unused or underused spaces, they hold forth common abundance where private property is ambiguous or in disuse, decline, or abeyance. We stroll through our neighbourhoods and even into the center of the city. Along easements and the sides of highways, at the ends of cul-de-sacs and in vacant lots, along open ditches and decrepit fencing, in the deteriorating zones of post-industrial wastes, the bramble entangles and marks the very edges and gaps in the regime of private property. They mark lulls and failures in capital, the moments of decay and depreciation after industrial production and before gentrification. In taking to our fences, the bramble even appears to be attempting to stand *between* properties, *on* their margins, *on* that thin line that is neither *mine* nor *thine*.

It is August and we are living in Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Portland, Sacramento. We go berrying. We assume blackberries to be a common resource—no one in his or her right mind would *pay* for blackberries, though I have seen them, and scoffed, in a supermarket. Like the historical English commons, the “patrimony of the poor” (Neeson 55), the blackberry bramble is governed by certain customary rules of use. Take only what you need and leave enough for others. Those in a neighbourhood have first dibs on the neighbourhood patch (you don’t drive in from the outside)—unless the patch is in parkland or other non-residential spaces. The berries high up or deep in a patch are for the birds and the soil and next year’s fruit—you don’t damage the brambles to get at the difficult to reach berries.

**[image 2]**

The blackberry thus offers a succulent critique of private property and capital. It is a small reminder of another way—of what is free and shared (how few examples of this are left to us), of what seems accessible to all and any, of what flowers, seemingly without purpose, at the very heart of neglect. Yet the blackberry is also an aggressive and prolific colonizer. Contemporaneous with European capital’s arrival on the West Coast, the blackberry has moved in rapidly and displaced native species. It has a firm hold and is not easily got rid of. I am even told that the bramble was the inspiration for razor-wire—private property’s toothy coil. But the difference is crucial: the blackberry is virtually the *negative image* of European colonization. It occupies the spaces capital has used-up or forgotten or left as underdeveloped pockets as it aggressively “builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image” (Harvey 54). The blackberry is capital’s other exposure—its shadow-self—and its quiet though ready critic. But it is thus also its epiphenomena or side-effect. The blackberry commons (as a social space and relation) is not so much a hold-over from the past as it is a by-product of capital’s speculative aims in the present and future.

This is important because my taking up the blackberry could easily spill over into a nostalgic dream of commons past, and I want to avoid this. What shreds of commons we now have are more often than not gaps and lesions in capital's ever-expanding body. They are an aspect of its uneven development—part, essentially, of its total vision—breaches that will later be filled with investment, once devaluation has proceeded far enough for re-development to be profitable. Nevertheless, because the blackberry occupies the space of capital's *future* investment, it has this relationship with the imaginary and the possible. It holds forth a possible world, and thus opens the door for the vision of other possible worlds. It embodies the fact that—in its relentless reproduction, capital leaves gaps and backwaters that speak of other avenues and modalities. The blackberry both points backwards and forwards from the capitalist present.

What I have in mind here is George Caffentzis's question as to whether the commons is “inevitably anticapitalist” (Caffentzis 9), and his caution as to the ways in which neoliberalism is attempting to incorporate, appropriate, subsume and neutralize the anticapitalist aspects of the appeal to the commons. The contemporary commons embodied in the social space of the blackberry is “compatible” with neoliberal capitalism to the extent that it is the by-product of capital's uneven development and relentless redistribution. But it simultaneously holds forth an other economy and other social relations: “another, non-commodified world where rational association and human solidarity would become the basis of social life” (Caffentzis 6)—and thus other potential futures growing—however parasitically—within capital—almost, literally, in the cracks in its concrete.

**[image 3]**

Poetry, too, occupies a vacuum left by capital. It is everywhere—we find it in public places (the “Poetry in Transit” of Vancouver and Victoria’s buses), hear it read on solemn occasions, stumble upon it as an inevitable part of our curriculum—and most of us at some point in our lives attempt to write something that might be called poetry, even if it only be as teen-angst in our diaries or corn-ball schmaltz in a gift card. We assume its ubiquity yet pay it little attention—certainly we are reluctant to see it as a commodity, as something we would *pay for*. Poetry is just there—abundant and free, springing organically out of neglect, filling the margins or gaps left by other more productive genres.

For both publisher and poet, poetry falls through the gaps in capital. No profit is made, except in a few very exceptional cases. Poets receive little in the way of remittance for their so-called intellectual property, and publishers, too, print their poetry books at a loss, enabled only by government arts grants or the surplus provided by more remunerative genres. Certainly there is cultural capital to be earned, but that is derived through measures that are more cooperative than competitive (community and peer-based support networks). Poetry may be intellectual, but it is hardly a property. Like the blackberry, we gather and pick what we need from its unexpected efflorescence.

That poetry’s relation to capital positions it as a commons is one thing—the fact that poetry’s *compositional practice* marks it *at its essence* as a *commoning* of linguistic and creative resources is something else. The stories of poetry’s common practice are legion and as old as the poem itself. Homer’s identity as a single author has long been suspect—typically “his” poems are taken as the product of a collective and multi-generational oral tradition. A few centuries later the Roman poet Virgil retold and riffed upon Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in his *Aeneid*—free from accusations of plagiarism. Throughout the Classical world the composition of *centos*—“patchwork” poems collaged from the lines of beloved master poets—was a common practice. I cannot cover this entire history here, but I would be remiss if I did not mention the commoning of poetic forms and themes in both the Provençal troubadour’s love lyrics of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and the similar verse colloquy shared by the 16<sup>th</sup> century English sonneteers. Moving towards the

modern era, I would cite Shelley's arguments for the poetic commons in his *Defence of Poetry*, where he writes that "every poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors" (679). Poetry's commoning finds no clearer expression than in Shelley's description of "that great poem, which all poets like the co-operating thoughts of one great mind have built up since the beginning of the world" (687).

This vision of poetry as a commons and a commoning of course contradicts the conventional sense of poetry as a private affair—perhaps *the* private art form par excellence—an entirely inward genre. This conception, however, is the result of our historical attempts to make poetry over in the model of privacy—to force it to stand only for the personal and subjective. I want, here, to remind us of poetry's other history and other way—it's commoning and its contradiction of capital's imperatives.

Let me give one final example, from a more contemporary poet. American Robert Duncan, whose career spanned the 1940s to 1980s, consistently referred to himself as a "derivative" poet. This, of course, was a direct affront to an artistic era dominated by capital's directive to always make its products "new." Indeed, influential critic Harold Bloom, in his landmark 1973 study *The Anxiety of Influence*, argued that "the commodity in which poets deal ... their property, turns upon priority" (64)—upon being first, original, new. Duncan's entire project was an attempt to resist the enclosure of poetry as a private property—to remind us of that Shellean "great poem" that all poet's have collaboratively built—to recall that "The language is not ours" (*Ground Work* 21). Its very ubiquity and substantive contribution to the essence of our species being marks language—like the genome—as unownable.

Duncan's declaration of dependence—of being "derivative"—can also be seen to evoke the spectre of intellectual property—for the very term "derivative" is used in the *US Copyright Act* to define those works which impinge upon the rights of so-called "original works." Whether Duncan had something as militant as a critique of intellectual property in mind is not the point—he everywhere upheld poetry's value as a *common property*—

everywhere declaring that, when it came to poetry, language could not be *enclosed*, but only used and shared. He writes:

The goods of the intellect are communal; there is a *virtu* or power that flows from the language itself, a fountain of man's meanings, and the poet seeking the help of this source awakens first to the guidance of those who have gone before in the art, then the guidance of the meanings and dreams that all who have ever stored the honey of the invisible in the hive have prepared (The HD Book 63-4).

4.

Poetry and blackberries are homologous in their relation to capital—marginal, fringe, ignored by investment, sprouting in the gaps profitability and privatization leave everywhere. If we were serious about an ethics of intellectual property, a case of infringement could be brought against almost any book of poetry—but these cases only occur where capital accumulates (witness the recent cases against Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* in 2001 and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in 2006). But because capital does not accumulate around poetry, it is allowed to exist—as it always has—as a putative commons—a stray place along the margins of productive life where it fruits seemingly without purpose or exchange value.

These are the reasons I am drawn to the blackberry as a poetic site. As a poet I am given to free feasting and to finding form wherever it blooms. In investigating the blackberry I have taken Henry David Thoreau as a guide. For Thoreau, the berry patches of New England were always utopian, common, and anti-capitalist. He writes,

The value in these wild fruits is not in the mere possession or eating of them, but in the sight and enjoyment of them.... If it were not so, then going a-berrying and going to market would be nearly synonymous experiences.... You cannot buy that pleasure which it yields to him who truly plucks it (*Wild Fruits* 4-5).

In *Walden* and his *Resistance to Civil Government* essay, Thoreau tells the story of his arrest for not paying his poll-tax. He describes coming out of the Concord Massachusetts

jail and stumbling upon a group on its way to pick huckleberries. Within minutes, he writes, he “was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off; and then the state was nowhere to be seen” (Walden 241).

I would follow Thoreau into the city, into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries, into globalizing capital’s rapid shifts and flows. I wonder if “the state” can or can’t be seen from within the urban berry patch—or what the apparent neglect of capital in vacant lots can tell us about that state and its continuing acts of enclosure. I take Thoreau with me and I pluck words from his books and from the books about Thoreau. I make a sort of *cento*. I arrange the words—the juiciest and tastiest—five to a line, for the blackberry seems governed by the number five (clusters of leaves in fives, five-sided canes). I allow poetry to grow where there is neglect. The words are not mine—they never are *ours*—but I am fed by them, just the same. I make a poem called “Blackberries.” Here is—just a taste.

*from* **BLACKBERRIES**

thrust out backward bramble common  
no visible fairyland utopian terse  
my companion and I along  
blue wall sudden as children  
throwing the baby in red  
dress frozen the quilted thrush  
no other interest save pecuniary  
voluntary huckle berry party affect  
the hedgerow the light dissolving  
onto mercury flash paper prints

the owl the sod the  
soft gravelly banks elastic nature  
confounds vagrant meandering river wrecks  
strew bottoms rivulet shrubs nuthatch  
thither all birds in woods  
spring nights and chickadee lisps  
especially for aldermen and epicures  
do not feed the imagination  
as study out of doors  
let alone your garden cease

I am astonished quenching click  
focus on bramble berry dell  
over against self window us  
a vision compelling in part  
scattering a legion about one  
my companion whispers between berries  
*the glory of architecture grows*  
*many an unnoticed wild berry*  
*vespertinal habits the walking of*  
*which the springs of life*

to find wind sudden together  
along roadside untended curving canes  
walk fields wood since selves  
those which you have fetched  
yourself carry us thither baskets  
shake off village return senses  
prospect harmony radius never quite

familiar of all large trees  
people would begin mere objects  
to the state burning fences

a rare red low being  
where it grows prickles sparingly  
this sound information in fives  
sides of canes and leaves  
fifth berry of the year  
trundled amongst trees to offer  
form to swallows songs or  
robins trying to recognize the  
shape of a nest amongst  
tangle of twigs and bramble

found in emerson antennae and  
stamina fuller dial rejected downcast  
delight and interjected this else  
solitary and clear perception was  
no apples theft from others  
orchard each fruit wild and  
independent of any other though  
many taken together make a  
better tart or with cream  
as his almost constant companion

to monopolize the little gothic  
window then did I use

with eyes upturned the clouds  
to wander in rich drapery  
that I might peep a  
truant hawk or write a  
brief obituary as to what  
of the beautiful it had  
lived election amongst the plants  
feeding all kinds of pensioners

everything miracle spore sated geometry  
found equinox thrusting words having  
no connection into all parts  
of every sentence boot jack  
for instance taking liberty nothing  
and no place ventured gained  
to whit the berries abundance  
how could any contain scarcity  
this many hands picking sense  
to gather scrutiny shared provenance

in moist woods and thickets  
shoots tinge the earth crimson  
my liberty is in wandering  
to what nothing owns but  
blackberries tangle throughout the fringe  
up to the town in  
trinkets beyond nature's own growth  
the fruit which I celebrate  
growing everywhere we cannot purchase

leaning into the dark cluster

scituate wandering lines in cool  
atmosphere frothed linen sweet attire  
the pleasure of gathering together  
the wreaths of black fruit  
cottonwood smell ripe hawks' truancy  
to call crows clatter we  
see so much only as  
we already possess jointly together  
a pronoun a basket bushel  
collected selves between no others

\*

true flavor never purchased obtained  
lost with the bloom become  
mere provender thus finished errand  
miles off midst endless berries  
nowhere states seen history prisons  
amidst sweet fern and sumac  
or growing more rankly in  
low ground by rich roadsides  
what no one owns shared  
thus our blackberries remnant commons

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