



Canadian  
Ocean  
Literacy  
Coalition

La coalition  
canadienne de  
la connaissance  
de l'océan

UNDERSTANDING OCEAN LITERACY IN CANADA  
EXPLORING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OCEAN THROUGH ART  
**ATLANTIC REGION**  
JUNE 2020

EDITOR: LISA (DIZ) GLITHERO

A close-up portrait of Jane Affleck, a woman with short, dark, wavy hair and green eyes. She is wearing a blue patterned scarf and a grey top. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a wooden door or wall.

## JANE AFFLECK, PhD

I am a ninth-generation settler of European descent, currently working as a sessional instructor at UPEI and as a freelancer in various capacities (writing, editing, and art). I have taught writing and art history courses and comics workshops at three different universities in Canada. I hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts (painting and art history), a Bachelor of Arts (English), a Master of Arts (English and Creative Writing), and a PhD (Cultural Studies). Recent artwork can be viewed at [WWW.JANE-AFFLECK.COM](http://WWW.JANE-AFFLECK.COM).

Currently based in Bedeque, Prince Edward Island aka Epekwitk, unceded Mi'kmaq territory under the provisions of the Peace and Friendship Treaties signed by the British Crown and the Mi'kmaq in the 1700s.



## ARTIST STATEMENT

Prior to the “lockdown” mandated federally and provincially in the context of COVID-19, the question was to be presented to the public in the form of 3 arts-based, in-person workshops, one in each of PEI’s three counties. The three venues were:

- The Summerside Rotary Library (provincially funded public library in the city of Summerside, Prince County);
- The Community Room at the Sobeys on University Avenue in Charlottetown (Queen’s County);
- Cavendish Wellness Centre (a multi-purpose community centre with fitness and other facilities in Montague, King’s County).

My original plan for the workshop was to have participants engage with the research question, as well as a guided meditation and art-making session that considered oysters and humans’ relationship to/with them (see Appendix A, pg 13). With workshops needing to be shifted to virtual or on-line delivery, I abandoned the idea of a livestream “event” and instead created an activity that would enable people to respond whenever they had the time or inclination by using a “mini-comic” as a possible prompt for the research question: **“If you and the ocean spoke the same language, what would you say to each other?”**

The comic presented empty dialogue bubbles that participants could fill in as they saw fit. I chose the comics-style imagery in part because I thought it might appeal to both children and adults; parents could sit down with their child(ren) and work on a response together, or kids could complete it alone. That said, I also know that comics can have a wide age appeal and that they have broad socio-cultural significance in the context of both literary studies as well as the visual arts and art-making.

## PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

In keeping with the idea of making the experience as accessible/open as possible, I offered participants the choice to fill in the speech bubbles on my provided comic or instead create their own comic, drawing, story, poem, etc. As a third option, I also created a short list of questions to potentially engage a greater range of participants.

The image on the first page of my comic prompt is of a non-gender-specific child holding a conch shell up to their ear, from which flows a blue wave representing the ocean. A speech or dialogue bubble extends from the child’s head containing only the word “Hello?” This image is based on the notion that we can “hear” the ocean by holding this type of shell to our ear; based on a Google search, this is a widely recognized visual symbol signifying the potential for a conversation between a human being and the ocean.



## RESPONSES AND ANALYSIS

There were a total of 14 individual responses in various media/modes (as an artwork, either the addition of dialogue to the comic; an artwork or piece of writing inspired by the question; answers to the original questionnaire; or in the form of a conversation).

Several general themes emerged from the responses:

- Identity, ontology, the nature of being, the oneness of being, diversity;
- Interdependence, symbiosis, mutuality, responsibility, reciprocity;
- Sadness/sorrow (including solastalgia), concern, regret, apology;
- Wonder, curiosity, fascination, amazement, gratitude, devotion, love;
- Change, cycles, lifecycles, sickness, pollution, waste, destruction, death;
- The future, future generations (human but also more-than-human).

Participants also asked many specific questions of the ocean, including: What is your name? What/who are you really? Why are you so salty? How can we give back to the oceans? How are you? ("I just wanted to 'sea' how you are doing...")

In my view, the nature of the research question implicitly prompts responses based on or manifesting as dialogue, and on notions of reciprocity. The majority of responses suggest that participants view the ocean as an entity with some kind of identity, albeit one that may be rather amorphous or undefined. Furthermore, in recognizing the ocean's identity and the gift-giving facets of their being, the majority of responses indicate that humans owe them our respect and admiration. As well, a couple of respondents noted that humans often have derived their identities from proximity to or engagement with the ocean. Prince Edward "Islanders," for example, would not be "Islanders" if not for the fact of being surrounded by water.

Note that I am using pronouns "they," "them," and "their" when referring to "the ocean," in order to communicate several points: that the ocean has no gender; that there are several oceans around the globe; that "the ocean" may, perhaps paradoxically, be best understood as both singular and plural. Furthermore, I support not using the pronoun "it," following from Robin Wall Kimmerer's discussion in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge,*

and the Teachings of Plants. As she explains, "it" tends to objectify its referent, and Kimmerer, as a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, asks whether white people/people of European descent should stop using "it" in relation to other living beings, as doing so leads more easily to being disrespectful, wasteful, etc.

Many of my ways of thinking about and knowing the natural world, including the ocean, have been amplified or enhanced by reading, hearing, or otherwise learning about the worldviews of Indigenous peoples. As I understand it, land-based education is a huge part of Indigenous resurgence across Turtle Island (now more commonly known as North America). Is it possible to also incorporate a kind of "ocean-based" learning? The underlying notion is that a major paradigm shift needs to happen with regard to humans' place in the "natural" world, our role as stewards, and how to have a more mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship with the ocean.

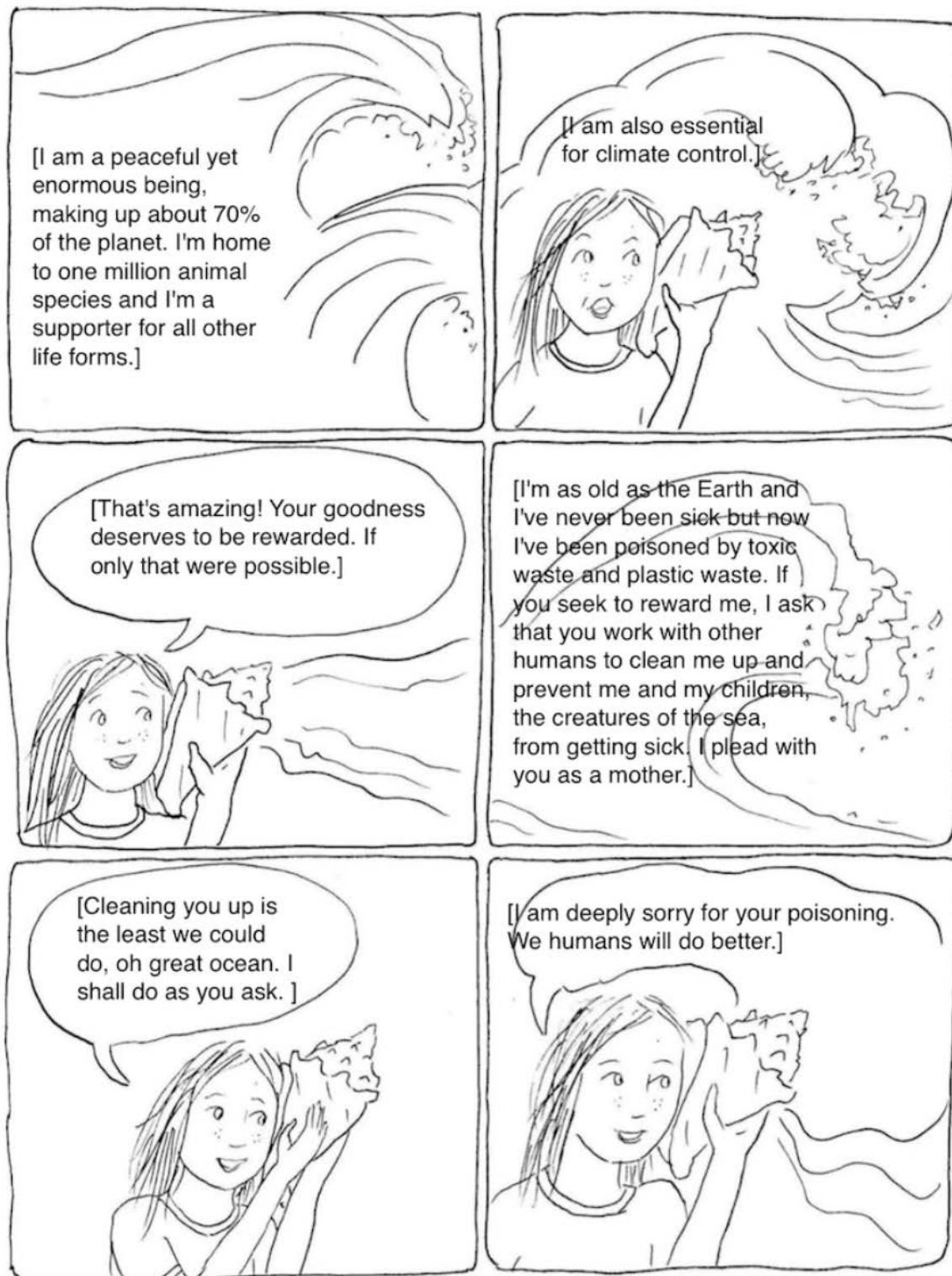
I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated in this research, and I hope that the contributions here presented are helpful in developing a national ocean literacy strategy.





## PART A

### COMPLETED COMIC PROMPTS



Respondent is located in Charlottetown, PEI.  
 Age: approx. 20  
 Sex: male  
 Ancestry: Black/African-American  
 Occupation/industry affiliation: Undergraduate student at UPEI (arts student)



The file submitted by the participant to artist appeared as above (i.e., with letters missing)

Respondent is recently based in Montreal, QC but lived in Halifax, NS for last 10 ten years.

Age: 49.

Sex: female.

Ancestry: White European/Caucasian.

Occupation/industry affiliation: Digital communications officer in higher education.





Respondent is located in Halifax, NS.  
Age: 60.  
Sex: female.  
Ancestry: White European/Caucasian.  
Occupation/industry affiliation: retired journalist.



Respondent is located in Halifax, NS.  
 Age: 46.  
 Sex: Female.  
 Ancestry: White European/Caucasian.  
 Occupation: Creative director at media company/magazine.



Respondent is located in Charlottetown, PEI.  
 Age: approx. 30.  
 Sex: Female.  
 Ancestry: Asian (Vietnamese).  
 Occupation/industry affiliation: undergraduate student (accounting).



## PART B

### OTHER RESPONSES - QUESTIONNAIRES

(ALL RESPONSES TO EACH QUESTION INCLUDED TOGETHER)

1. CONSIDER THE SPLASH PAGE OF THE COMIC AND ANSWER THIS QUESTION: "IF YOU AND THE OCEAN COULD SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO EACH OTHER?"

"If the ocean and I could speak the same language: I would set up a Translation business and set about teaching the human race about how the ocean lives and how best to live with it."

"I would apologize for the state of the world. Unfettered capitalism has put profit before people, progress before the environment. We know that the ocean is an important part of our ecosystems and we can't afford to ignore the dire situation of our waterways."

"I find it fascinating that water has so many shapes and forms, so I will definitely ask the ocean about that topic. In my opinion, water is the most interesting element since it can evaporate into air, transform to solid, and even plasma. It is the symbol of life in both science, religion and literature. Water covers up to 70% of the earth and 60% of an adult human. However, nobody really knows what is the true form of water, or even if it has an identity or not. In that situation, I probably will ask a lot of question about its existence also."



2. WHAT DO YOU THINK IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST THREATS TO THE OCEAN?

"One of the biggest threat to the oceans is man's (woman's) refusal to believe that we have a massive impact on the ocean's health and subsequently to our own. With this ignorance, comes plastic pollution on an unprecedented scale, fishing species to extinction, and possibly the biggest threat: global heating of the oceans. One of the main problems is that humans live on land and only a few of us spend any time on the ocean and therefore, as a species, we do not examine the impact that we have on this myriad of complex ecosystems. Recently on a sailing trip in the Florida Keys, I was shocked to see how dead that body of water has become. The water temperature in that region is almost unbelievable. The average temperature in April is 25 degrees C / 77 degrees Fahrenheit (<https://www.seatemperature.org/north-america/united-states/key-largo-april.htm>). There are few marine organisms that can live in that heat. It's like an underwater desert. This is happening in Canada as well. Ocean heatwaves that change surface temperature by as much as 5 degrees above normal. (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/research-ocean-temperatures-ships-1.4872492>.)"

"Humankind and the pursuit of capital. The inability of people in power to understand that by ignoring the plight of fish stocks, sea mammals, coral reefs and microorganisms that all depend on healthy oceans, we are putting ourselves at risk. We are part of this ecosystem and depend on it. We are slowly poisoning ourselves."

"Pollution most definitely."

"Humans—with our plastic (so much plastic), overfishing, dumping of fertilizer into the ocean, acidification..."

"Overexploiting and industrial waste, which includes toxic chemicals and radioactive waste, which cause tremendous harm to the marine ecosystem, killing more than a million sea creatures. It takes hundreds of years for the marine ecosystem to recover after the discharge of industrial waste."

### 3. WHY ARE OCEANS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

"The oceans are magnificent and vital to our survival on this planet. They contain the largest, most sustainable single food source in the world. They are the lungs of the planet, providing the majority of the world's oxygen. Personally, I find the oceans and indeed all bodies of water, simply fascinating. There exists such a diversity of organisms and ecosystems of which we only know a small fraction, as to make human beings and their world, supremely dull by comparison. The vastness of the oceans is just quite astonishing. I am in awe of the size of them. The Pacific Ocean (north and south) is larger than all of the land masses on the earth combined. To put that into digestible terms: Canada is 3.8 million square miles. The Pacific ocean is 16 times larger than Canada. The mammals which live in these underwater environments are incredible and exist in environments that we can observe, but not begin to comprehend: whales that dive to 5000 feet, fish that exist in total darkness with the pressure of 30 atmospheres, and sharks that can live for over 200 hundred years. "

"I believe that we are all interlinked, all part of the same ecosystem. If we care for the next generations, and we want them to grow up healthy and at peace in their environment, then we cannot allow industry dumping toxic sludge into the oceans, we cannot stand for plastics polluting our water, we cannot accept oil spills and the proliferation of the cruise ship industry in our waterways."

### 4. IF YOU COULD LEARN MORE ABOUT THE OCEAN, WHAT WOULD YOU WANT TO KNOW?

"I would want to know how I can help circumvent the appalling desecration of this magnificent weave of underwater worlds. I would want to know what whales are saying to each other. I would want to know how to give back to the oceans and ensure their survival and existence. I would want to learn more about the interconnection between global heating, acidification, salinity and ocean currents and wind patterns."

"I'd want to know practical ways I can make a difference through my consuming habits, and learn how to better protect our oceans."

"I would want to learn more about the creatures that inhabit them."

"I want to know more about the creatures who live in the deepest parts of the ocean. And I want to know how humans can live in harmony with the ocean."

"I definitely have a lot of questions in mind, but I would want to learn the recovery pattern of marine ecosystem after the oil spill and the discharge of industrial waste."

"Back home they're a huge part of our beaches, and beaches are what The Bahamas is most famous for."

"Oceans are the circulating blood of an enormous ecosystem. When they're vigorous, healthy, and alive so is the entire planet. Without them most living things would die and the planet would be transformed into something unrecognizable. Plus it feels good to stand on the edge of an ocean and engage their being with all the senses."

"I was born in a city known for its beautiful beach and diverse marine ecosystem. I will proudly call myself a child of the ocean. Whenever I smell the salty smell of the ocean, I feel like home. The ocean has sentimental meaning to me since my hometown lives on fisheries and tourism, all thanks to the ocean."





## PART C

### OTHER RESPONSES - QUESTIONNAIRES

(ALL RESPONSES TO EACH QUESTION INCLUDED TOGETHER)

1. (phone conversation) Respondent located in St. Peter's Bay/Morell, PEI. Age: 46. Sex: Male. Ancestry: White European/Caucasian. Occupation/industry affiliation: fisher (oyster aquaculture and lobster)

The ocean has been different things to different people in different eras – and in our modern period, this relationship has changed a lot...

The ocean has been a barrier, but that has also been a salvation... it has offered protection... as well as food and transport.

The ocean is the ultimate equalizer... nothing stops it... because of the properties of water, it always finds its own level... it will keep flowing to fill any void...

The ocean does everything for us:

- Entertainment and leisure
- It can kill us in 17 different ways [not sure if he was being literal here...]
- It plays a huge role in modulating our climate.... This is the only planet we have, and we have the right amount of land, water, and oxygen to support life – if any of those things were off just a bit, we wouldn't be here...

In big, broad terms, thinking about it really blows you away... like looking up at the stars in the sky at night... this huge, complex system that does what it does...

Besides being straightforward functionally important, the ocean is integral to the pantheon of human stories – providing inspiration since we first started telling stories...

Aside from the last 100 years, the ocean has been pretty much our only form of transport... no commercial flights till late 1950s...

The ocean is a conduit for commerce...

Industrial waterfronts and surrounding communities ... because of the need to use the water as a trade route, and its use in industries (sawmills, shipbuilding around PEI, for example), then the workers lived nearby. All this has all but disappeared in the past 60 or so years.

Brooklyn Navy Yard offered as one example.... 1000s of workers, living nearby, that whole area served that one function... the waterfront as a place where people lived, went to school, worshiped, died, etc. cradle to grave....

People have derived their identity from the ocean... from being in proximity to it in these ways... distinction... communities formed around the idea of the ocean... and to enjoy the interface of land and sea

The ocean is powerful...

In/around St. Peters Bay – which is this 11 km-long finger of ocean pointing into the land... it's one of many bays and estuaries around the Island, but unlike the Hillsboro River, for example, which at its mouth is part of the ocean but becomes fresher, or just somewhat brackish, the farther inland you go... St. Peters Bay is ocean all the way into the village [which is at the tip of the river's "finger" ]. So it's unique in that way – and you've got lobsters right there, at the village, because the water is still salty there... it's really interesting. And there's so much food there for mussels and oysters, because the tides flush in and out, so it's incredibly productive.

But still, we've found a way to max it out... a bunch of fisher people, especially those whose aquaculture business is in mussels, they've noticed that the spat are not growing as fast, because there's not enough food in the water to support all of them... so they all agreed to remove a percentage of their crop to help the remaining ones grow bigger.

You've probably heard the word Anthropocene? So we've changed the environment of the ocean so much, that there's not enough food [for the mussels – but also, then, ourselves...]

I think about this stuff a lot... I've given up a lot of opportunities to be here, to return here, and as a result, my lifestyle is probably not as prosperous as it could be. But I've been drawn to the ocean my whole life, and when I'm not around it, I miss it... it's why I spent three years working in Alberta, to make enough money to come back and build a modest house here so I can live how I want, near the ocean...

I'd thank the ocean, to make sure it understood how amazing I think it is – and I'd acknowledge all it does for us, and all the abuse we inflict on it.... We've put barrels of radioactive waste in deep ocean trenches, thinking it

would just go away! And all the oil tankers.... And during WWII, all the ships that were sunk, either carrying oil or just the fuel they had themselves... all that's been added to the ocean.... If we drained the ocean, imagine all of the shipwrecks from the war in the Great Circle Route, we'd see all kinds... the Germans had a quota on how much shipping weight they had to sink – tens of thousands of tons per month... that was the first time a war on an ocean between two continents had happened... and with steel, not wooden, ships....

The ocean is so big, I think we take it for granted... and especially now that we're moving away from those communities that were formed around the ocean... my father, who is 73 now, told me that as a kid, he remembers these small houses in St. Peters Harbour, near the shore, where people would live in summer to fish, because they were so close to shore.... The fishing essential to their livelihood... they migrated seasonally to take advantage of the food sources, to get the most out of their environment, and created that little community at the same time...

Nowadays, when people do that – move to a summer house – they want to bring all their comforts with them, it's not about the environment, necessarily, and then they don't really appreciate those comforts because they have them all the time, rather than living simply, smaller, for a few months of the year and then returning to their comforts... they refuse to acknowledge that maybe there's a time and a place for those comforts... they have to be big all the time [i.e., in having all their comforts both summer and winter... in two different locations].

About 40 years ago, my father was telling me, these people from Vermont came up here to buy some cheap farmland – they bought a field near the water and built some humble cottages... on one hand, from our perspective, they were well-off – they could afford to leave their jobs and come here for the summer. But they were not well-off enough to buy land and build a summer home in Nantucket, or Martha's Vineyard, one of those wealthier places close to home... so they had to travel to get what they wanted... [i.e., a kind of migration, and with their "humble" cottages, kind of in keeping with the idea that you don't need to take everything with you...]

Nowadays, though, there's no "humble" cottage... if you have that much money [to buy land and a cottage], then you want to do good on your investment, and have a large cottage and all the things... your exact life moved to a different place... but you're also being insulated from the community... are you really adapting to the location? You're sitting there on your deck with your G&T, enjoying the view, but... I could go on about rural gentrification. Those earlier industries and the communities that formed around them

to do those jobs – now, those people can't afford to live in those areas, where they work... the land/property value is too high... the only ones who can afford it are "from away" ... and they're here only 2 weeks a year, so the community is fragmented, even destroyed.

Double taxation doesn't make up for the damage... it's not the fault of the people who come here... they're nice and all... and I think people "from away" bring new perspectives and liven things up, it's great... but in this case, they're not contributing to the community and helping it grow. Public policy is hurting us.

The ocean gives us gifts... oysters are a cure for all ills... they filter the water, they're good for you... the power of the ocean, the depth of it... the mystery... we know more about the surface of the moon than we do about the bottom of the ocean. We've just scratched the surface of its usefulness, maybe... but at the same time, we've done so much damage... and with climate change, the glaciers melting are "polluting" it with fresh water... ocean acidity... waste...

There was a guy who used to live in [St. Peters] Harbour ... He would sit in his boat and throw beer cans overboard – just let the cans float away – he had no shame, he wouldn't try to hide it or anything, just finish his beer and toss the can over his shoulder. It was infuriating.

[tells anecdote about a NS Dept. of Fisheries advert in the 1980s, that was "cheesy/hokey" – about littering – Dad and kid on boat, kid drinks pop, wants to know where the garbage is to put the bottle... so asks Dad, who tells kid, "No garbage can on the boat, son – just throw it in the ocean! The ocean will take it away!"]

The materials of] our garbage has changed... but our attitude to littering hasn't changed... [anecdote about dumps near the shore that are now being eroded and the trash being exposed and adding to the new trash... that old trash mostly glass and metal, though – today, it's plastic]

2. (in-person conversation) Respondent located in Bedeque, PEI. Age: 73. Sex: Female. Ancestry: 8th-generation settler-Canadian, white European/Caucasian. Occupation/industry affiliation: retired nurse.

Artist [drying dishes]: "So, if you could speak the same language, what would you and the ocean say to each other?"

Participant: "I would say – I'm sorry for all the damage we've done to you, to all the shit we've thrown into you." [continues washing dishes and looking out the window at the birds]





## APPENDIX A

### THE IDEA AND INTENTION

This workshop will be an experiential meditation on water-dwellers, specifically, various mollusks in micro-ecosystems on Prince Edward Island/ Epekwitk, a part of the world that many in central Canada may never have the chance to visit and from which they might feel disconnected. The objective of the workshop is for participants to begin thinking about mollusks with more empathy and to better understand how they are an integral and important aspect of coastal ecosystems. The workshop theme and activities are inspired in part by contemporary object-oriented ontology (OOO), such as that proposed by Timothy Morton in his book *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. Morton recognizes the ways humans are kindred with non-human beings and encourages an active recognition that we share this world and need to respect other species. With this in mind, workshop participants may gain a new perspective on non-human entities – in this case, both mollusks and the waters they live in – and develop a less human-centric worldview.

Mollusk shells will be provided to all participants. Each participant will be given one shell, along with paper, pencil, and markers. First, holding their shells, participants will be guided through a meditation about the shell and its former inhabitant: How might it feel to live in a shell? To have saltwater flowing through you for several hours a day? etc. Despite these differences, what do humans and mollusks have in common? Next, participants will engage with their shell more personally/independently, considering colour, shape, age, texture, smell, etc., as applicable. Finally, participants may either compose a verbal piece (e.g., a poem or spoken word piece) about their shell, or they may create a drawing using provided paper, pencils/markers, which will be shared with the group. This workshop will be accessible to the visually impaired, as they can touch the shell and participate orally in the final part (e.g., perhaps by recording their words with a smart phone). Children and youth aged 7+ are also welcome (with parental guidance between ages 7 and 12).

<< Mussel & Oysters (Attachment). Ink and watercolour pencil on acid-free paper (2018). Pale oyster attached to blue mussel.



Oyster on Fisher's Glove (Throwing Down the Gauntlet). Ink, watercolour pencil, and table salt on acid-free paper (2018). Black oyster fisher's glove found on shoreline with small oyster attached/ growing over two fingers; background is iron-oxide reddish brown, like PEI's soil.



Cycle of Life. Ink and watercolour on acid-free paper (2019). Small oyster shells anchored to larger one, in blue-grey, mauve, ochre, and sepia hues.