

Root and branch

by Miranda Hill

The word *root* derives from the Old English term *rōt*, and Old Norse *rót*. Both can be traced back to the Proto-Indo-European base *wrād-*, meaning both 'branch' and 'root'. *root* speaks to grounding (root) and connection (branch).

The word *root* evokes feelings of belonging, origin and interdependence. It speaks to the complex web and networks that give structure and flow to life. Families have roots; identities are rooted in a place. In times of crisis, individuals and communities re-root themselves. Roots disturb. They shift soil, resist, and crack through and against structures and materials even those as tough as concrete. Roots stabilise too; they play a crucial role in flood prevention, maintaining soil structure and integrity. Roots provide strength – both physical and emotional – yet expose a permanent vulnerability and fragile tension. Sometimes and quite quickly, roots can be uprooted, torn and lost. *Root*, in all its meanings, reminds us of a land that is alive – in constant flux – relational and resistant.

Our contemporary connection with the land has become increasingly abstract and distorted. As industrial and agricultural systems have intensified, we regard soil as a mere resource and have lost touch with our roots. Perhaps this is where María Puig de la Bellacasa's work is relevant.¹ Drawing on Donna Haraway's ideas of 'staying with the trouble' – learning to live with and care for the network of species around us – Bellacasa calls for a fundamental reorientation of our relationship with soil and the earth. She argues that soil is not inert matter but a vibrant, living network of organisms and histories that sustain existence. By acknowledging our entanglement and mutual dependency within this complex web, we can begin to better care for the soil and the ecologies around us.

To return to our *roots*, in both language and ecology, is to reconsider how we look after both the soil that sustains us, and each other, and to recognise that we (humans, the earth and all ecologies) are a complex web of entanglements.

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Barrow grew from a small village - a cluster of farmhouses that belonged to the Cistercian monks of Furness Abbey. Like most of Low Furness, life here was

primarily agrarian. The residents worked with the land, reading its rhythms, tending to agricultural cycles to sustain communities; there existed a healthy reciprocal relationship with the living system.<sup>2</sup>

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the discovery of iron ore and the arrival of the railways, Barrow rapidly transformed into a town of industry. Land, for many, was no longer a living partner but a resource from which to extract wealth. The way of cultivating and harvesting by hand diminished, as did a need to tune into weather and annual cycles that once dominated everyday life.

Barrow's industrialisation sits within the wider expansion of the Victorian empire when dominant Victorian attitudes towards nature were still informed by a centuries-old construct: the *Scala Naturae*.

The concept of a 'Ladder of Nature' originated in classical philosophy (Plato & Aristotle in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Later formalised in medieval Christian thought, this model positioned all forms of life in a strict vertical order: God and the divine at the top, followed by humans, animals, plants, and inanimate matter such as minerals and rocks. Adapted by European colonial powers from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, it became a powerful ideological tool. White, European, male subjects were placed at the top, while Indigenous, Black, and non-European peoples were positioned lower in the hierarchy – often associated with animals or "wild" nature. This was violently enacted, too, by the Victorians across their colonial empire. The development of Barrow can be seen through this lens: contributing to an increasing and violent separation between humans and the natural world.

Today, Barrow is a complex, layered place – defined by its industry as much as its unique ecology. The town owes its existence to the exploitation and heavy industrial activity that formed and shaped it. Yet it's also celebrated for its remarkable beauty. Much of the area is designated as a Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) and is recognised for its unique wildlife and habitats. This coexistence creates a tension in a post-natural landscape - shaped by industry and human influence but still adapting and evolving.

This rupture between human and nature, body and land, lies at the heart of *Remember Nature: Intra-actions*<sup>3</sup>, which challenges the colonial constructs that framed nature as 'other'. The exhibition draws on theorist Karen Barad's concept

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<sup>1</sup> Puig De La Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Soil exploitation and degradation predates industrialisation. In upland regions of Britain, including Cumbria and the Furness peninsula, peat soils - which are slow forming and take millennia to form - have been damaged by centuries of drainage, grazing, and burning. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, state-backed schemes intensified this with thousands of kilometres of

drains cut into peatlands. Even where land remains in use, soil function has been compromised - losing its water retention, structure, and regenerative capacity. It is one of many examples that a disconnect from soil as a living system began long before the era of industrialisation.

<sup>3</sup> In 2015, Gustav Metzger (1926-2017) invited artists, students, and institutions across the world to respond to the urgent need to "remember nature" - not only as a source of beauty, but as something under threat, as something to protect, and as something we are

of *intra-action*. Unlike 'interaction', which implies separate entities acting upon each other, 'intra-action' acknowledges that beings and environments emerge through relationships. We are not independent from nature – we're expressions of it.

In *Ideas of Nature* (1980), Raymond Williams highlights this rupture. In the quote that opens this essay, Williams describes how we often speak of nature as a universal force that connects us, yet industrial and colonial societies have treated it as something separate – a resource to be controlled or used.<sup>4</sup> This separation allowed environmental exploitation and the dehumanisation of people seen as 'closer to nature', particularly Indigenous and colonised peoples. By classifying these people as part of 'nature' rather than 'culture', colonial powers could justify taking their land and dominating their lives.

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Maddi Nicholson's work opens the exhibition celebrating James Ramsden, a defining industrialist of his time. Ramsden was central to the industrial expansion and its social impact, in a Victorian world defined by hard social and economic hierarchies.⁵ Her reconstruction of his 'tower' invites us to see the world from above – a symbol of distance between those in control and those who do the work, between power and care – and also gives 'nature' back her voice. Drawing on Gustav Metzger's radical DIY spirit, Nicholson's playful and performative approach uses art and protest symbols to draw attention to all ecologies. She urges us to act and to recognise that we are not separate from the living world, but a part of it.

Artist Alistair Debling, in his project *After Nature*, engages with the idea of the *Scala Naturae* to explore how these hierarchical ideas have been represented within Art History and the canon. By re-staging historical portraits with local participants, he shows how ideas of 'nature' have been used to naturalise systems of privilege and exclusion, revealing the performative construction of power. His process also demonstrates a more collaborative relationship with the world around us – engaging with the earth, minerals, people and places - where identity and status are not fixed but constantly co-created, through our social and material intra-actions.

inextricably a part of. Metzger's many projects inspired ecological awareness and activism, including anti-nuclear and political protest movements.

⁴ Williams, Raymond. "Ideas of Nature." In *Problems of Materialism and Culture*, 67–85. London: Verso, 1980.

⁵ James Ramsden stood at the centre of this industrial shift - engineer, industrialist, civic leader. He helped to usher in railways, ironworks, docks and shipbuilding. Ramsden, like many industrialists operated an extractive way of working upon the land, rather than with it, it was a resource rather than a partner. He built his tower - metaphorically - an elevated

Both Nicholson and Debling's work can be seen as illustrating the performative nature of social hierarchy. Systemic injustices and social constructs - rooted in class, racism, colonialism, and empire - are maintained through repeated actions and behaviours that build consent for the elite to perform these structures.⁶

This idea can be explored through Judith Butler's theory of performativity. We might think of identity itself not as something we are but as something we *do* – made up of gestures, habits and roles that can be changed.⁷ If we understand the hierarchies of industry and empire as performances that have been repeated over centuries, we can see that they are not natural, fixed or inevitable; we remember that they can be challenged or reimagined.

In *Intra-actions*, these performances are challenged, re-staged and reconstructed. The artists use performance, costume, and theatricality to reveal how relationships to class and nature are maintained like scripts and invite us to question how we might learn to perform roles differently, in ways that reconnect us (to place and each other). Debling and Nicholson challenge the hierarchies that shaped Barrow's industrial past. Class, here, becomes a kind of drag: a role that can be worn, questioned and reimagined.

Intra-actions is not a nostalgic attempt to remember nature in all its glory, but rather a political, ethical, and sometimes playful act to remember the ground from where we came. It celebrates our entanglement with the land and invites us to re-root and acknowledge the very earth we emerged from.

Looking forward, the exhibition turns to ecological repair and care. In contrast to the extractive systems that once defined Barrow, the artworks invite us to return to the soil - to re-root ourselves and to heal those divides through food, knowledge and shared, inclusive experience. Faye Matloub's work is a meaningful attempt to do this. Her practice celebrates food as a living archive of knowledge - shaped through care, passed down through generations, and inseparable from the land it comes from. To grow, cook, and share food is an act of remembrance: a way to honour the land and to resist the amnesia that took hold with industrialisation.

Ultimately, this exhibition navigates the ruptures left by industrialisation and colonial thought - between body and land, human and nature, culture and class -

perspective that symbolised the industrial mindset. The ground below was no longer a space we lived within and next to, but a resource to be managed and extracted from.

⁶ While natural hierarchies exist within ecological systems (for example, food chains and predator-prey relationships) these are relational and cyclical rather than expressions of dominance or value. The mentioned hierarchies relate to social, economic, and colonial power structures that have been constructed by humans.

⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 2006.

and offers a space to imagine how we might live differently. Its presentation in the heart of Barrow-in-Furness, in the Art Gene gallery, is especially fitting - in a town that embodies both the legacies of industrial and colonial disruption, and a striking unique natural environment still shared by humans, flora and fauna alike.

By returning to our roots and remembering nature, not as a gesture of nostalgia but as a practice of care, *Intra-actions* asks how we might re-learn to live *with* the land rather than *upon* it. It's an exhibition grounded in hope. Through acts of growing, sharing, and learning together, we might begin to repair what has been divided, and root ourselves once again in the earth. Afterall, we are all intra-connected.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Metzger, Gustav. *Remember Nature: A Call to Action by Gustav Metzger*. London and Farnham: Serpentine Galleries / University for the Creative Arts, 4 November 2015.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Williams, Raymond. "Ideas of Nature." In *Problems of Materialism and Culture*, 67–85. London: Verso, 1980.

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