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Bresnihan, Patrick, "John Clare and the Manifold Commons"

Bresnihan, Patrick. "John Clare and the Manifold Commons." *Environmental Humanities* 3, no.1 (2013): 71-91; doi:10.1215/22011919-3611239.

There are growing and justifiable concerns about the degradation of the planet—the land, sea and atmosphere on which all life depends. While these problems unfold on a global scale they are not evenly distributed, either in terms of cause or effect. This has not stopped powerful and universalizing explanations about why "our planet" is being exhausted, and how "we" must respond with urgent action. One of the effects of this response is that environmental problems are naturalized as empirical facts around which new forms of governance and regulation must emerge. While this technical response might be effective at managing discrete environmental problems it can obscure important questions about the ways in which we produce and reproduce social and natural life. The 18th century was also a period in which the problem of scarcity gave rise to new ways of managing and organizing social and natural life. The naturalization of scarcity was a cornerstone of liberal economics, the intellectual justification for various forms of enclosure and "improvement." One person who challenged this powerful narrative was the poet John Clare (1793- 1864). Where liberal economics began with the abstraction of self-interested "man" and finite "nature," Clare began with his own experiences of the world around him. This commitment to the here and now is not to be confused with notions of a "pre-modern" union of human and nature. Rather, Clare's poetry describes and reveals the many different natures which unfold through ongoing, negotiated and changing relations between people and things. Rather than a fear of limits, the excess of possibilities inherent in this vision of the "manifold commons" provides him, and us, with a different way to imagine and enact alternative forms of social and natural life. (Text from author's abstract)

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