

## Against Silos

A quick library search would probably turn up an academic article with the title “Against Silos.” It would be an argument for the value of interdisciplinary work against the constraints of traditional demarcations of scholarship. Indeed, it could work as a title of a manifesto for the energy humanities, which prides itself on the ways in which it draws upon different fields, conventions, genres, and disciplines to be able to think the complex societal interconnections of energy’s uses and ramifications.

I, however, am using the title literally. So as to then be metaphorical.

If you’ve driven through the midwest of the United States or Canada, you’ve seen the massive fields of uniform lines, green or brown, punctuated by massive steel or concrete silos. Silos are most often used to store grain after it is harvested. Sometimes they are filled with non-edible items such as fertilizer or cement. Whatever the contents, silos are used to stockpile things for a time in the future when they may be needed. Possible future needs could include:

A bare patch in a monocrop field?	Dump some of that stored fertilizer on it. This will force the crop to grow, tricked as it is by the copious amounts of nitrogen in the fossil-fuel product. The bare patch is probably there because you have already used fertilizer, and thus killed the soil biology that would have produced nitrogen for the plants in the first place.
A long cold winter?	Pour out the fermented silage for the cattle that have been bred to produce marbled meat and large quantities of milk. Unlike hardier rustic breeds, these cows do not have thick coats to keep them warm through the winter, nor do they have the hooves or the intuition to scratch through the snow to the forage below.
A war in the fifth biggest wheat-exporting country?	Well, if you’re the aggressor, destroy as many farms and silos as you can, so that you devastate the country’s economy. If you’re the US, build temporary silos on the border so as to try to get the grain out of the country and back into global distribution.

Are silos necessary?

Yes, for the kind of food production that industrial agriculture promotes. The practice of planting large swathes of a monocrop make the use of machines for tilling, seeding, and harvesting more uniform and efficient. It necessitates less people. It makes sense to store large quantities of one uniform product before it is taken by truck, train, or ship to its global destinations.

No, for the proponents of regenerative agriculture, which is a bit of an umbrella term for many different practices such as agroforestry, agroecology, silvopasture, permaculture, real organic, and sustainable design. What all of these practices hold in common is a commitment to diversity of plants and animals, and to soil health. One field may be found to grow various grasses, brassicas, fruit trees, and nut shrubs. Pastured in it are a variety of different grazing animals. Worms, bacteria, and fungi live in its soil. With this amount of variation, a silo would not be useful, since there is no one thing that is produced in bulk.

Provisioning for uncertain futures is certainly part of these agricultural forms. Seeds may be selected, gathered, and stored every year so that annual crops can be rotated. Ripe vegetables and fruits are eaten to surfeit when they are in season, a tendency that is very much encouraged by Ayurvedic and Traditional Chinese Medicine for overall health. The rest are canned, pickled, or fermented. What isn't picked by human hands is eaten or decomposed by the many more-than-humans who cohabit the land. Many of the foods growing in such a system are perennials that continue to produce through seasonal changes.

There's something very Bataille-ean about what I just described. This system of consumption is about spending when the excess is there, instead of hoarding it all away for the future. Yes, you may freeze raspberries, but I am pretty sure you're also going to be stuffing them in your mouth as you pick them.

Let me be clear. I'm from Canada, so I get the need to store food for a long winter diet. I am kept alive by the global commodity chain that allows me to have wheat, rice, greens, and fruit all year round. I don't know how to live off of chestnuts and preserved meat. But I'm certainly curious. And would be glad to live amongst communities that know how to do this better.

I don't, however, live amongst such communities. For most of the year, I live in Toronto, in what I will, for the sake of argument, call a silo. A silo, in metaphorical terms, is a group or unit that is isolated, that does not benefit from interaction with others. As a humanities scholar, I think of myself as someone who reads widely, and who interrogates many of the commonplaces around me. But I'm 53 and am only just beginning to think about food systems, which seems like a pretty big knowledge gap about something that I consume every day. It is easy to describe all the reasons why—supply chains, big ag, infrastructure that is geographically distanced and rendered invisible. Food makes its way into the city at night, from remote areas, through back alleys, and appears on the shelves without most of us even thinking about how it got there.

That's just a case in point. Let me scale this up a bit, and get polemical. I think that many of us, as knowledge producers, often living in urban areas, surround ourselves with like-minded people. As environmental humanities scholars, we may not be siloed in our departmental specialities, but we are siloed as *experts*, as those people who tell others the things they need to know, but also as those people who talk most amongst themselves. I know that universities and professional organizations are really pushing the need to reach broader publics (and I'm a proponent of this myself), but I don't know if being a public intellectual will get us very far in terms of getting outside of our echoing silo chambers.

So what do I mean with this diatribe against silos, both real and rhetorical? I think that, as humanities scholars, we are not like certain kinds of specialists who need to focus very specifically on one minute object of study in order to ascertain results. We have a different role, in the academy and in society. My call, then, is for non-expertise. Let's take some risks by venturing into communities and concepts where we are newcomers. Let's not speak only to each other, but try instead to listen to others who may not be able to value our expertise. Let's spread ourselves thin as scattered seeds; let's intertwine ourselves amongst diverse roots, nourishing

each as if we were mycelium; let's pop up everywhere like the invasive species that we all are. Let's plant some chaos gardens and see what happens.

What would this new "Renaissance man" be called? I leave that up to the speculative fiction crew, to come up with a name (non-gendered, non Eurocentric) that would capture this image of open-minded and open-hearted people who tread into areas that they know little about, not to teach others—though their knowledge may become an essential part of the system—but to become part of different experiments, communities, spaces, collectivities. People who spend instead of hoard, who disseminate instead of accumulate.

Oh, that sounds so inspiring and idealistic. But I have to admit that it doesn't work that well on the ground. I'm thinking of my own foray into growing things in interior British Columbia. As an ignorant newbie, my son and I have read countless books on permaculture, and watched Youtube videos about soil structure, plant guilds, and beneficial pollinators. We are lucky enough to farm in a valley in which no one uses fertilizers or pesticides, in which wild animals forage and roam through our gardens. And yet the debates in the community are fierce and divisive, and I cannot help but wish that the anti-vaxxers, anti-maskers, and Sasquatch seekers would listen more to the experts.

In particular, one argument that really riles me is that of the Freedom Convoy (which has a strong foothold in the area) advocating not only for their political freedom but also for the farmers, with whom they stand. They have recently been flying Dutch flags at their protests in order to show their solidarity with farmers in the Netherlands, who have been organizing against their government's decision to reduce agricultural emissions. This issue has been transplanted to Canada's protesters since the release of the Liberal government's climate plan. There is a lot of misinformation circulating amongst freedom convoyists about a "fertilizer ban" that the Canadian government has no intention of enacting.

Convoyists now cry, "We support the farmers!" And they should; we should. We should understand the precarity of farm labour, and the ways in which government subsidies since the post-war period have incentivized farmers to increase yield through the use of chemicals—chemicals which they now fear will be taken away from them. I, an expert in deciphering messaging, in reading contradictory discourses, in analyzing the fantasies that sustain ideology, can parse this all out. But I can't have a conversation with people in my community because I'm too scared of my own anger at what I see as their social-media fuelled conspiracies.

Maybe I'm arguing against expertise because I've seen how badly we experts are disparaged and ignored. Maybe it's because I don't believe that expertise protects against the potential ravages of a future in which we eagerly gulp up the remaining clean air to insist to each other that we have the knowledge and the answers. I guess we might as well inhale that air, we couldn't have stored it in a silo anyway.