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Karen Bakker: Honouring a Sharp Mind, Fierce Intellect, Thought Pioneer, Heart-Led Scientist and Friend

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A memorial to the life and work of Karen Bakker

We were all lucky to know Karen in different ways and to work with her in various capacities at different times of her life. We all lost Karen too soon – she had so much to share and give to her friends and family, to her community, and to the sharing of ideas and insights in general. She had already accomplished so much in her 51 years, but in many ways she was still budding in her knowledge and approach and in the audiences she reached.

Karen Bakker's legacy goes far beyond her conceptual contributions to the discipline of geography and the associated fields of political ecology and water governance, although these are what she will certainly also be remembered for. As such, it is fitting that we share a tribute to her in an academic journal, notably one focused on water governance.

We each responded to a few questions regarding Karen's impact on our work and our lives. What follows are the responses we each gave. They are shaped by the various relationships we had with her over the years as student, colleague, supervisor and mentor. We each thought about what inspired us most about Karen's approach to scholarship and to life in general and about her conceptual contributions, to which we have found ourselves returning over the course of our own lives and careers. We explain how and when her work and presence in our lives has been significant, what it catalysed for us personally, professionally, and in broader societal activities in which we were jointly involved with Karen. We

conclude with some joint reflections on Karen's broader impact within academia and in the world and on her ongoing legacy in both realms.

MICHELLE KOOY

Despite her amazingly brilliant and sometimes intimidating mind, what I remember most deeply about Karen was her heart – the heart which drove her passion for theorising the meanings and barriers and struggles and solutions for water and environmental justice. I remember her passion for making the world a better place for all humans and non-humans to live, and how all of her creative and groundbreaking scholarly work stemmed from this. She was determined to explain – and in that way intervene – in our world such that the relationship among people and between people and nature would be made right: respectful, equitable and reciprocal. Karen contributed – and pioneered – many conceptual debates on how to think about this, how the mind could explain and contribute to making a more just world.

But she also lived it, felt it, from her heart. Others in this forum – in her world – can attest to this. I contribute a few examples from how I knew her since our supervisory relationship at UBC where, from 2002 onwards, she steered my doctoral research, professional network, career options and other parts of my life.

First, I believe her mind was always led by her heart, even despite how rationally and scientifically she pursued what she loved (including motherhood and child-rearing). Scientifically, what she set out to explain, and intervene in, through her theoretical contributions, academic writing and research projects came from her heart. This was felt. This feeling is what intuitively drew me to her in her first year of teaching at UBC. Her passion was also felt by many others and is, I believe, what drew in many of the non-academics from whom we learned and with whom we collaborated.

The heart behind the science is what connected so many people with her work, both inside and outside academia. Not always following the academic jargon or latest theoretical advances, many activists and scholars I worked with in Indonesia, thanks to Karen's research on water privatisation and urban water governance, were nonetheless able to grasp the heart of Karen's explanations of their lived realities (served neither by public nor private water institutions and marred by historical urban environmental injustices) in ways that gave them useful words, concepts and arguments with which to build a shared understanding of their environment and, from there, options for making relations (state/society, nature/culture) more just for all. Her work gave hope and generated solidarity, and she worked from lived realities of these issues in ways that made sense to those living them. Her sparkling and seemingly effortless ability to do this across a variety of research themes and conceptual debates was truly astounding. I feel these contributions were more than conceptual, they were also somehow intuitive and instinctive; it was as if they had been gifted to her and humbly received.

What I appreciated in some of our later interactions – post PhD – was Karen's respect and appreciation for knowledge outside academia. She knew that she, and academia overall, privileged the mind and conceptual understanding and that among her peers her ability to do that stood out. She knew her value and did not minimise her abilities or capacities; she took her space within male-dominated arenas. But she was always aware that the mind is never the only or the most important way to understand lived realities, that they were *lived* and were felt.

This might be surprising to those who did not know Karen personally or whose fear of her mind held them back from opening up to her generosity. At many moments in our relationship, this was me. Yet, as too often in life, in hindsight I see what I closed myself off from as Karen was consistently generous and humble, while always honest and constructively critical. She treated everyone as her equal. As her graduate student, this was continually surprising to me. Even when I often wanted her to be the expert, to 'know best', she repeatedly refused this position. In this way she encouraged not only scholarly independence, but also self-responsibility. Whether in a supervisory meeting discussing one's research or when considering one's own life choices in terms of career, job options or partner choices, Karen

illuminated the available options; she reminded me that there were always choices to be made and that there was often no best, or even better, choice, just different consequences. In her supervision, she consistently made us aware of where we were making conceptual and methodological choices in our research designs and in our lives beyond the university, and of why and how these choices shaped what we did, who we were, and what our options were. In this way, as my PhD supervisor she played a role that went far beyond science to shape how I saw, and thus lived in, the world. Her voice often still whispers in my ear when I am supervising my own students: methodological choices about how to explain and/or frame – put boundaries around – one’s research and one’s life choices. She made it abundantly clear to me that we have so many choices and that our responsibility and our freedom are revealed through these choices, but that we must be conscious of what we are choosing and why.

Karen was likewise able to see the capacity and potential in others. She often knew the possibilities that lay before others in their lives, expanding the range of choices imaginable to the individual, extending the horizon, raising one’s own estimation of one’s potential and indeed the collective potential of our society, and how we can (re)make our world.

Thank you, Karen, on behalf of me, on behalf of my two daughters, on behalf of all the students I have learned from at the IHE-Institute for Water Education, and on behalf of all those outside of academia with whom we collaborated. Thank you for all that you have left us which still lives on.

LEILA HARRIS

Karen’s work was hugely inspiring for me as a junior scholar. She was incredibly productive. Her work was field-defining in terms of political ecologies of water, neoliberal natures and related debates. She worked in diverse contexts, from issues of water marketisation in Wales, to hydropolitics in South Africa and Spain, to damming and urban water issues in Southeast Asia. Indeed, one of my major motivations for moving from the US Midwest to the University of British Columbia was to be able to work with Karen. I imagined that together we would make UBC a key place to study water issues from a critical perspective. Karen’s generosity and vision upon my arrival helped at least in part to make that happen, as she offered to bring me on as co-director of the Program on Water Governance. She shared with me her templates for successful grants she had written, gave me critical feedback on several projects I was initiating, and brought me into several research networks focused on diverse aspects of water issues in the Canadian context. The learning curve was steep, but so was the payoff in terms of developing new research collaborations on key issues of concern and creating space for other colleagues and students to thrive.

I continue to think of Karen whenever I set out to delineate the conceptual contributions of a project, articulate the politics surrounding a key water debate, or dig into the nitty gritty of a budget for a funding proposal. Karen was a master in all these things, from the big conceptual innovations to the small details of what makes a project work. When Karen presented, she spoke clearly and with conviction. Her talks were always masterful in both content and style. Over the course of our work together, and as Karen started to write on more and more diverse terrains of knowledge well beyond water (including her most recent interest in bio-digital lives and earth futures) it also became more and more clear how gifted she was at writing. She wrote beautifully. She developed her craft more and more as she advanced in her career. We all have the good fortune of being able to continue to access her writing – this legacy will live on.

Conceptually, Karen’s work remains central to debates around water privatisation and marketisation, around what makes water’s materiality matter in terms of how we use and manage it, and around how water is bound up in the consolidation of key inequities of use and management. Apart from her specific contributions, what I find myself returning to over and over again is more the way she went about deciphering key elements in a field. She knew how to get to the kernel of the issue. She did this in several ways: by asking probing questions (for example, how is this political, why does it matter, or how is the political being eclipsed in how this is discussed), and by creating typologies. Yes, Karen was also a master

at typologies. She would sort through and organise ideas looking for consistencies and gaps, and in so doing she would often be able to make fundamental contributions to the mapping of diverse fields of knowledge, that is, where a field has been and where it needed to go. She did this famously with her dissertation on water management in England, neoliberal natures debates, and water privatisation. She has also left an indelible imprint on the human right to water (HRW) debates. It is nearly impossible to discuss HRW without attending to the politics of the concept and its associated policy dimensions, and Karen is largely responsible for that. This is also a clear example of where her work extends far beyond the academic realm, in that HRW activists are very aware of her arguments and this awareness has often changed their approach to their diverse political and organising work. In Canada, Karen helped to pave the way for novel approaches to Indigenous water governance. Her work pushed the boundaries of academic knowledge and challenged funding agencies' continued exclusion of Indigenous knowledges and approaches. She helped open up a broad category of research and supported a cadre of Indigenous researchers who have been critical to ongoing efforts to decolonise and resituate water governance across Canada.

As I was lucky enough to know Karen personally, it is important to me to be able to address her personal side as well. Karen was brilliant, strong and no-nonsense, embodying a model of leadership that was ahead of her time. She prioritized her family, alongside her work. She did not have time or energy for some of the academic games and politics. She asked hard questions. This made her intimidating to some, but for those who knew her and spent time with her, it was impossible not to know her as welcoming, warm, funny and kind. She could discuss any topic and often contributed incisive observations to a conversation. This included topics as diverse as food, local politics, and recreation and the outdoors, whether in Vancouver or France. This was her quick mind at work. She invited new scholars for walks or meals and often made a huge effort to welcome and support junior women and scholars of colour in her field. In doing so, she also understood and paid attention to the politics. This was not only her human side; she was also compelled to do more by her deep understanding of the issues that faced academia. She did not let UBC off the hook for paying women less, on average, than their male counterparts. She undertook the painstaking labour of documenting the gender pay gap at UBC until the administration responded. In all such efforts she was effective and sharp. She laughed easily. She disagreed with some things and worked to change them without being (or staying) angry or bitter. She spent time making apple sauce, cooking a good meal, nurturing her two daughters, and enjoying the beauty of being outdoors and walking with friends. She shared her knowledge and her gifts widely. These are all things I appreciate about her in addition to her academic pursuits and contributions. All of these things are too numerous to count.

As my colleagues have also suggested, Karen was sharp, incisive and tireless. She was passionate and curious. Her inquisitiveness was likely what stood out most about her to anyone who engaged with her ideas. Especially when you observed her speaking on diverse issues, it was clear that this was someone who was an expert on more than just her own topic. She had an amazing mind and a passionate spirit and her depth of curiosity was boundless and untiring.

She will be sorely missed.

RUTGERD BOELEN

There is so much about Karen's work that inspires me. I first met Karen at the Alternative World Water Forum in Istanbul, after many years of written exchanges on the themes of neoliberal water governance, water rights, the commons and the human right to water. Karen's enthusiastic interventions, firm positioning, brilliant analyses, and our lively discussions confirmed what I had imagined and hoped for, that Karen was not just a deeply creative and inspiring thinker but also a most warm-hearted and engaged scholar in the true sense. In all the years since, she has been, is, and always will be a profound inspiration for thinking through new ideas and disruptive conceptualisations, and a companion for critical action and

societal movements. Joining actions as well as founding new frameworks for understanding and fighting water injustices, her rousing intellectual, political and social contributions to the Water Justice Alliance/Alianza Justicia Hídrica are immeasurable. This is how her insights and affectionate involvements have deeply influenced water justice debates and actions around the world and have made them what they are.

Fundamentally, Karen's leading work and collaborative solidarity in terms of content, meaning and stance express what is so much needed in the water world – in the worlds of water. In our meetings, writings and discussions we shared her work on these overt and covert water worlds and struggles. Always open to thinking through her own ideas, I remember the energetic conversations we had when she asked me to critically discuss with her the diverse draft chapters of her book, *Privatizing Water*. Since its 2010 publication by Cornell University Press, the book has become a real eye-opener and a standard work, both in academia and more generally. In all her work, Karen has shown that there is a tremendous plurality and diversity underneath, inside and above the worlds that mainstream reductionist policies commonly call the 'water world'.

In terms of her most abiding contributions, Karen's work provides a profound critique of this modernist expert project of water science and policymakers who call for 'objectivity' and 'neutrality' in the sense of keeping distance, avoiding engaged and emotional contacts with 'common people' and with socio-ecologies on the ground. Karen's grounded research and her interaction with people in the mud, with humans and non-humans who face the dark side of state-centric, extractive and capitalist water development, shows the intrinsic problems of this 'keeping distance'. This objectifying myth of distancing keeps most hydro-technological scientific research, water governance and policy formulation from feeling what is actually happening and from imagining what could and does happen in the territorial realities into which presumptively neutral scientists and policymakers dramatically intervene. Maintaining distance also makes it possible for such expert institutes, planning departments and funding agencies to more easily make far-reaching decisions about the lives of humans and non-humans. I often bring our debates on these issues in my writing and teaching.

Beyond being a creative scholar, Karen had a sharp eye for new developments and approaches in the water (and other) worlds; she would discern with all the misrecognition pitfalls and power traps that were to be expected for those who are already marginalised. This continuously helped me and all our companions to stay sharp, critical and on the move. Among her many writings, articles that stay with me are, "The 'Commons' Versus the 'Commodity': Alter-globalization, Anti-privatization, and the Human Right to Water in the Global South" (*Antipode*); "Material Worlds? Resource Geographies and the Matter of Nature" (*Progress in Human Geography*); "The Limits of 'Neoliberal Natures': Debating Green Neoliberalism" (*Progress in Human Geography*); "Water: Political, Biopolitical, Material" (*Social Studies of Science*); "The Ambiguity of Community: Debating Alternatives to Private-Sector Provision of Urban Water Supply" (*Water Alternatives*); "Neoliberal Versus Postneoliberal Water: Geographies of Privatization and Resistance" (*Annals of the American Association of Geographers*); "The Eco-Scalar Fix: Rescaling Environmental Governance and the Politics of Ecological Boundaries in Alberta, Canada" (*Environment and Planning D*). No less inspiring is her contribution to our special issue on the knowledge battles around mega-hydraulic development, which is entitled, "Contested Knowledges in Hydroelectric Project Assessment: The Case of Canada's Site C Project" (*Water*), as well as her contributions to the Alianza Justicia Hídrica and the Riverhood Collective (<https://movingrivers.org/riverhood>).

In terms of her broad contributions, what stands out in Karen's work is how, in all its facets, concepts and themes, she scrutinises and aptly criticises the lack of empathy, inability and often unwillingness of dominant science, policy-making and intervention practices to understand the very real concerns, sufferings and marginalisation that they themselves actively create. This ignorance and actively upheld (even applauded and self-congratulatory) inability to think through and socially imagine, leads to deep and structural indifference. Karen's writings express how formal natural resource governance 'success' is distinct from real improvement as judged by local villagers, water users, women, peasants and indigenous

peoples. As shown by her work on mega-dam building, on water privatisation, on market environmentalism, and even on the human right to water and community-based governance, this manufactured ignorance in the planning and design processes of water and territorial interventions enables donors, state agencies and water-extractive industries to disregard the production of human misery, ecocide, and the misrecognition of indigenous, peasants' and women's water and life worlds.

Challenging this water world ignorance, I would say that Karen's balanced scrutiny actively combines the work of identifying, understanding and recognising the plurality of modes of knowing, of diverse epistemologies and of how we know in plural, with the search for how and why we don't know things. Karen's political-ecology focus did not simply approach this ignorance as an absence of knowledge; rather, it assumed that this politico-modernist science's ignorance of suffering and misrecognition was – consciously or not – often politically and structurally produced. Bringing this to light, challenging it, and presenting alternative ways of thinking about it and acting on it is one of Karen's major contributions. This contribution is not just to science; it extends far beyond that, constituting a fundamental contribution to our ways of knowing, sensing and working together and to our ways of living our collective social and political lives.

Karen's brilliant and warm-hearted focus was in the true tradition of Fals Borda's *sentipensar*, or feel-thinking, even if she may have never mentioned this notion of action-research that entwines thinking with the heart and the mind. It sheds, I would say, permanent new light on all the water themes and debates she touched upon, including the debates and discussions we had on the privatisation of resource ownership, the commercialisation and commensuration of water values, the neoliberalisation of governance, legal pluralism, customary water rights, indigenous governance repertoires, hydro-territorial transformation, and the struggles for river commoning and multi-scale water justice and alter-globalisation movements.

Heartwarming, also, are Karen's messages and evidences of hope and solidarity. Her most recent involvements with the Riverhood debates have been profoundly encouraging; there, she dedicated herself to themes that ranged from commoning struggles against river grabbing to alternative ways of engaging among human societies and between humans and other-than-humans. An examination of the myriad modes of resistance shows that "not fitting the model" is often a conscious choice rather than the result of backwardness or unreasoned stubbornness. Sister of the Water Justice Alliance, Karen and her work remain with us. They continue and deepen the comprehension and appreciation of the multiplicities of water and life.

TOM PERREAULT

Everything I know about water governance I learned from Karen Bakker. There was a time when this was almost literally the case. I barely knew Karen on a personal basis, and we only ever met a handful of times at editorial board meetings and sessions at the Association of American Geographers. Although I'm sure she never knew – and I certainly never told her – she was there for me when I needed her. Or, more precisely, her research and her towering intellect were there to guide my thinking. Karen was younger than me by a few years but we began our careers at about the same time. After arriving at Syracuse in 2000, I was eager to begin a new post-dissertation research project. The famous Cochabamba "water war" occurred in April of that year – the same month I defended my dissertation – and I decided to begin a new project on the relationship between neoliberalisation and rural water governance in Bolivia. I had much to learn. My dissertation research had examined Indigenous organising in the Ecuadorian Amazon and had nothing to do with water or neoliberalism. I therefore set out to read as much as I could on the topic and, by serendipitous good fortune, Karen was beginning at that time to publish on the commodification of water. I quickly discovered her work and I read (and reread) all of it.

Her work was revelatory for me. Her articles on the production of scarcity in the 1995 Yorkshire drought (*Economic Geography*, 2000), water *mercantilización* in Spain (*Environment and Planning A*,

2002), and the political economy of water privatisation (*Studies in Political Economy*, 2003) profoundly shaped my thinking on neoliberal water governance. It is not an exaggeration to say that *An Uncooperative Commodity* (Oxford University Press, 2003) changed the course of my career. Of course I read other scholars on the topic including, over time, all the other contributors to this piece, but it was Karen's work that I discovered first and which arguably had the greatest impact on my approach to the subject. It has, in turn, filtered into my teaching and advising; my graduate students have read Karen's articles and books in my seminars and for their comprehensive exams and my undergraduates know her work from my lectures and their in-class activities.

Karen's analyses of state and market (re)regulation in water governance and of the preconditions of water's commodification have been foundational to my understanding of neoliberalisation. These themes were developed in her book *Privatizing Water* (Cornell University Press, 2010), an extended examination of water governance that drew on, and expanded, her earlier work on commodification. Importantly, the book traces the shifts in discourse and policy from market failure to state failure to governance failure: the inability of water policy to account for the varied needs of all citizens. In parsing these concepts and their real-world implications, the book provides both a conceptual framing and a set of concrete examples of water's commodification. It is a reference to which I have returned many times over the years.

What is it about Karen's work that I found so impactful? In part it was the timing: she was beginning to shape debates over neoliberalism, governance and water privatisation just as I was starting my own research in this field. But, more than anything, it was her forensic analysis of core concepts that helped me understand the various processes and relations involved in neoliberal water governance. Few scholars before or since have matched the breadth and depth of Karen's intellect. Her rigorous explication of concepts such as institutions and organisations, privatisation and commercialisation, of regulation theory, the commodity form, merit goods, the commons and materiality were for me like a string of lights switching on. Her work encourages readers – indeed, *challenges* readers – to think more critically, carefully and systematically about hydrosocial relations and the institutional forms they take. I often found myself rereading passages and assiduously taking notes and I'm sure I'm not alone in this. Karen's work does not exactly make for easy reading, but it is absolutely essential reading. It is always illuminating and, more often than not, it clarifies concepts in a way that is rare in academic literature.

Karen's careful analysis of the 'commons' versus the 'commodity' (*Antipode*, 2007) is a shining example of this. The article stands as a landmark contribution to scholarly and activist debates on the human right to water. With well over 1300 citations (her most-cited work, according to Google Scholar), the paper's reach is clear. Her rigorous examination of neoliberal restructuring, international policy-making, rights discourse, and alter-globalisation activism shifted discussion away from facile calls for recognising water as a human right and towards an emphasis on common property and collective action. Importantly, this work highlights the limits of so-called 'rights talk' and the importance of distinguishing ends from means. As with so many of her writings from this period, her emphasis here is on social relations and material practice, and on the importance of governance and the institutional forms it takes. "The 'Commons' Versus the 'Commodity'" is an immensely important article and one of the clearest examples of Karen's lasting role as a public intellectual.

Even at this early stage of her career, Karen's work shaped debates well beyond water. Her collaborations with Gavin Bridge on nature's materiality (see, for example, *Progress in Human Geography*, 2006), her article on neoliberal nature and ecological fixes (*Environment and Planning A*, 2009), and her contribution to the *Handbook of Political Ecology* (Routledge, 2015) helped shape research agendas in resource governance and resource geography more broadly. Her work on nature's materiality is particularly notable as it engaged with parallel (but fundamentally distinct) debates over materiality in cultural geography and cultural studies. Grounded in Marxian political economy and with an institutionalist focus, Karen's interventions served as something of an analytical corrective to culturalist debates and as a touchstone for work on materiality by political ecologists and resource geographers.

Similarly, the importance of Karen's writings on neoliberalism and neoliberalisation extended beyond water governance. Her engagement with Noel Castree's work theorised the concept of 'ecological fix', which she initially defines in simple terms as the ways that capital turns an environmental threat into an opportunity (2009: 1782); she then goes on, however, to provide a rigorous theoretical explication of the externalisation and internalisation of environmental risk, including a typology that parses the various forms that ecological fixes can take. The concept draws on and extends Harvey's notion of the spatial fix and is relevant not just to water resources but to environments of many kinds (climate being the most notable). Karen's contribution to understanding the so-called "post-neoliberal turn" in Latin America (with Julian Yates, *Progress in Human Geography*, 2014) provides one of the most careful analyses of actually existing neoliberalisms and the complex relationship between neoliberalism as theory and neoliberalisation as practice. It is still, in my view, the go-to article on the topic of 'post-neoliberalism' in Latin America.

What makes these works so important? Why revisit articles and books that were published a decade or more ago? For most of us, our influence as scholars is far from certain. Most articles have an ephemeral impact, if any at all. Many books sit on shelves barely read, eventually passing quietly into obsolescence. Not so with Karen's work. So many of her works on water governance, neoliberalism and neoliberalisation, the ecological fix, commodification, materiality and so much else stand today as foundational contributions to these literatures. In many cases, they shift the terms of debate and establish new research agendas. These works, products of Karen's capacious mind, also serve as models of careful and rigorous scholarship. They certainly did – and continue to do so – for me. Something to emulate, if never quite be equal to.

ERIK SWYNGEDOUW

This is without any doubt the most difficult and heartrending writing I ever did. It should be outlawed that a supervisor outlives his doctoral students. It is not tolerable. It is like parents surviving their children, by a long way the most painful experience in life. Yet, the impossible happens. When news reached me in August 2023 – through a message from our common friend Roger Keil – I refused to believe it. I tried to find confirmation on the internet, but all I could find was Karen's brilliant TED Talk on the Sounds of Life. Unfortunately, Roger was right as other friends shared the impossible news.

Karen was (and still is) a truly inspiring woman, scholar and activist whose razor-sharp intellectuality always rhymed with a deep-seated humanity and concern with humans and non-humans around her. Karen was one of my first PhD students at Oxford University in the early 1990s. She was part of an amazing cohort of graduate scholars, each of whom became inspiring intellectuals in their own way. It was a truly amazing time during a period when neoliberalisation was on the rise, but we all shared and nurtured a belief in the possibility of critical resistance and emancipatory political transformation. I am writing these lines a few days after Donald Trump was re-elected as president of the USA and many of us feel like we are staring into the abyss without much hope for a progressive shift any time soon. Of course, Karen never surrendered to the bleak cynicism that marks so much of critical analysis and thought these days.

Karen had already gone through a remarkable undergraduate career before she joined us at Oxford University. Her original research plan focused on the neoliberalisation of urban transformation in the UK but, like many of us at the time, she quickly became fascinated by the vexed problem of how environmental and ecological issues entered critical theory and, through that, emancipatory politics in an age of neoliberalisation. As many will surely recall, the 1990s was not just a period of political retrenchment; it was also one of profound intellectual change as post-modernist perspectives ruthlessly challenged the presumptions of earlier radical theories – particularly Marxism – without offering much in terms of strategies for progressive change. Karen and her cohort refused to jump on this then-fashionable bandwagon. Karen was not one to be a dedicated follower of fashion. It seemed to us that the environmental/ecological/non-human condition was dramatically affected by processes of capital

accumulation and political neoliberalisation. For Karen, engaging with the non-human became a key terrain for articulating and engaging in progressive politics. Political-ecological perspectives, we contended, opened potentially radically new avenues for emancipatory, just, and environmentally sensible social and political transformations. Karen committed herself enthusiastically to this intellectual programme, a programme that required a fundamental reconfiguring of critical social theory that would take the question of nature and the non-human as an integral part of its theoretical formulations. Without the non-human as a foundational part of progressive social and political perspectives, no sensible, inclusive and just world could be contemplated, let alone struggled for. Of course, it was equally important to demonstrate how such a perspective could inform ways of doing research and acting in the world.

It was this conjuncture that led Karen to embark on a PhD that focused on the contested terrain of water privatisation in England and Wales. She brought together a theoretically sophisticated and incisive conceptual framework with painstakingly pursued and often difficult fieldwork. Over the years, the nature–society–politics nexus would remain Karen’s key academic passion, while she explored new avenues and became a celebrated writer on a range of themes close to her heart.

Her first two books became canonical contributions to our understanding of market environmentalism. Water (and, by extension, all non-human natures) is an uncooperative commodity that signals the complex, contested and never fully succeeding incorporation of non-human stuff into the circuits of capital circulation and market exchange. Her contribution would set the agenda for a generation of scholars to come. Her early interest in reformulating political economy as political ecology was of course later extended and completed by focusing more centrally on postcoloniality and Indigenous struggles and rights. Here, also, she reformulated received wisdom and set the beacons for incisive new views and perspectives.

After she graduated and moved to UBC, she of course thrived as an intellectual, mentor and unrelenting advocate for a more inclusive mode of living for humans and non-humans alike. With Michelle Kooy, she embarked on a canonical analysis of the political ecology of water in Jakarta, and with our common friend Gavin Bridge she delved into the place of materiality in shaping political trajectories. Her unique perspective was ultimately best summarised in her authoritative *Antipode* contribution, “The ‘Commons’ Versus the ‘Commodity’”. Her view of life and society could not be expressed better: living in a common world with others in a just and inclusive manner is our only hope in a world increasingly straightjacketed by the privatisation of commodity exchange and the pursuit of impossible individual satisfaction promised by the commodity.

At Oxford, Karen also met her husband, Philippe. Together with friends and colleagues, we shared endless evenings in each other’s homes, in pubs, during outings and at other gatherings. We discussed and contemplated the world for many hours and, most importantly, we had many, many, many laughs. It was indeed a privilege to have Karen around. Friendships for life (until it ended way too early), both emotional and intellectual, were forged in these encounters. We are missing Karen more than words can tell.

COLLECTIVE INSIGHTS

We have all had different experiences of Karen and her work. We enjoyed different aspects of her scholarship and value and remember different elements of her person. Yet for all of us, Karen’s mental curiosity, societal contributions and warm personality continue to have a deep impact. She taught us and inspired us and she gave us a model to aspire to in terms of how to conduct rigorous and impactful work. It is also clear that for all of us her work was not only intellectually challenging and groundbreaking; it also engaged in politics, forged solidarities and challenged orthodoxies. Her legacy comes out of this alignment between her mind, heart and actions, leading to such an incredible body of life’s work. What

she created in her lifetime is incredible and it continues to matter to us and to so many people on the front lines of water struggles throughout the world.

While we all work with water, it is also abundantly clear to all of us that Karen’s contributions extended well beyond water debates and politics. Whether dealing with nature–society debates in general, or with the challenges of modernist science and technology, or with the themes of her more recent work on the sounds of nature and bio-digital lives, Karen had a knack for groundbreaking, field-defining and important work. She was a mentor, collaborator and friend. Many of you will not have had the good fortune of knowing her in the ways that we were able to, as her supervisor, colleagues, peers or mentees. Yet, we are confident that spending time with Karen’s words will be an easy way to understand her and her contributions, and will be time well spent. We encourage you to do so and to continue to think through the many openings that her work and her ideas offer. Her passion and her brilliant mind, her heart-felt scholarship and warmth, and her incisive and inspiring insights remain on offer for all to enjoy.

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