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Almost every variant of environmental philosophy envisions a world of lower consumption, more modest aspirations, and greater care and attention to the impact of economic and technological choices on the natural world. If humanism is about freedom, the capacity of our species, by self reflection and political deliberation, to liberate us from reification and blind fate-like processes, then the environmentalist project is perhaps the most humanistic ever conceived.

—Lewis P. Hinchman

Today perhaps it is wise to try to transfigure the old humanisms that have played important roles in Euro-American states into multiple affirmations of entangled humanism in a fragile world.

—William E. Connolly

In a ruling that protects circus animals from abusive treatment, the High Court of Kerala in India in 2000 said: “Though not homosapiens, they are also beings entitled to dignified existence and humane treatment sans cruelty and torture.... Therefore, it is not only our fundamental duty to show compassion to our animal friends, but also to recognise and protect their rights.” There have been a number of other constitutional, legislative, and judicial enactments in several countries that affirm the moral standing and “considerability” of non-human species and natural systems.

Is the ethical space linking the human and the non-human worlds limited to the personal and cultural virtues and sentiments of charity, compassion, and kindness, or does it also include matters of public justice and political obligation? In other words, are ecological policy questions to be left to private decisions made by each individual in the court of his or her own conscience, or are they also public moral decisions to be made collectively as part of political morality and ecological governance? The former involves each of us as private persons, the latter as public persons or citizens.

I think that many would agree that neither the treatment of animals nor broader issues of environmental regulation and policy should be left solely to private self-interest and personal moral or religious belief, although many progressive environmental reforms can be reasonably justified on those grounds. But one may seriously question whether voluntary beneficence and prudence will be sufficient in the face of carbon-intensive global capitalism. Some trends of private governance are encouraging, but unless the ecological crisis of unsustainable practices and institutions is addressed politically, democratically, and constitutionally, then the greening of green will be too little, too late. Does ethical and political argument designed to strengthen discursive democratic citizenship and turn it into ecological citizenship have any promise?

I share Lewis Hinchman’s sense, if not his specific terminology, that the moral and political imagination of ecological philosophy envisions greater care for natural being in the deployment of economic behavior and technological power by human beings. Care means species-appropriate attention to the health, resilience, integrity, flourishing, and beauty of the non-human world and its inhabitants, even as it also means attention to these aspects of human life. There is nothing in the logic or history of the practice of care that limits it to relationality among humans only. Indeed, perhaps even more so than with important normative concepts like rights, justice, and dignity, the concept of care readily brings the mind and heart into situations of interdependence, mutuality, and precarity. Discourse that delimits the idea of care within human-centered and ethnocentric assumptions notwithstanding, care is one of the most promising orientations for the multicultural and transhistorical reclamation effort now underway, in these pages and elsewhere, “to transfigure the old humanisms,” as political theorist William Connolly says, “into multiple affirmations of entangled humanism in a fragile world.”
But an ecological deployment of an ethic of care is but one building block for a new vocabulary of political and moral imagination in the Ecozoic era. Others include an ecological interpretation of liberty or freedom, community, agency, the public, the private, and the civic. Moreover, there are several key normative concepts that I would group along with care under the rubric of “relational practices of just recognition” that will be crucial in the reinvention of a humanism of right relationships between humans and nature. These are solidarity, membership, mutuality, empathy, belonging, kinship, reconciliation, and trust.

Being a citizen means more than passive security and private productivity or enjoyment; it requires active engagement and participation in joint efforts to promote the common good.

In this essay I reflect on the notion of citizenship and on what I see as two entangled issues pertaining to it. First, what can the concept of citizenship mean and enable when it is interpreted as a practice of relational recognition of the moral standing of others and of oneself? Such a treatment of citizenship would be aspirational and in the subjunctive mood; it would be “as if” citizenship, “could be” civic practices. Second, what are the special demands on the practice of citizenship when entrusted with governing the interaction between humans and nature—in other words, when working to sustain a healthy symbiosis between human collective action and natural Earth systems’ functioning and resilience? Thinking through this question may provide a new angle on what is often referred to as “ecological citizenship.”

It seems to me that among the varieties of types and theories of citizenship that are powerful and active today, discursive citizenship is the most promising starting point for the emergence of ecological citizenship.

Citizenships: Historical and Contested

The history of political theory has been, among other things, a perennial restoration of the interconnections among a people’s understanding of the present, their vision of the future, and their memory of the past. All political and economic action that shapes or distorts ecologies and Earth systems is action in time. The interconnections of past, present, and future, their entanglement, form the basis for that repertoire of potential human agency and that constellation of actual social practices—deliberating, judging, agreeing, compromising, rule making, and the conscientious fulfillment of promises and obligations that constitute a political form of life, a bios politikos. However, the course of events over the past fifty years, the great acceleration and the great unraveling and unwinding, has called into the question the continuing viability of the normative tradition of political theorizing. More recently, the rise of authoritarian and nativist populist regimes and movements in many countries calls into question the values and institutions of constitutional democracy itself.

These developments and trends have abetted the striking dissolution of civitas or civic community and the attenuation of the activity of citizenship in our lives—citizenship, that is, as articulated in the work of Aristotle and in its revival in the civic humanist discourse of the Renaissance and in the age of democratic revolutions. In this discourse, citizenship is not so much what it became for later liberalism—notably, having rights or the promotion or protection of individual interests—as it is the relational praxis constituting our most fully human ethical self-realization. The space of this praxis is the participatory democratic forum, the town meeting, the teach-in—all the consciousness-raising events of the civil rights, feminist, or environmental social movements. It is the voices calling for justification and justice in the Black Lives Matter protests taking place amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the scourge of massive unemployment. Violence, disproportionate risk and mortality, hardship deliberately imposed in the name of freedom—all strike hardest against
those denied moral standing and recognition. Citizens are those who will not turn their heads and pretend that they don’t see. Citizenship in this sense is a lost treasure; it has not flourished in the administrative structure of state capitalism, in the interest-group pluralism of liberal market democracies, nor in the privatization and social-welfare austerity policies of neoliberalism.13

Of course, to lose the concept of citizenship in the form that I want to recover here is not to lose the concept entirely. One might argue that citizenship is still understood and practiced in non-democratic countries, but it surely is most fully operative and most normatively important in partnership with what Abraham Lincoln called “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”14 Consequently, it is democratic citizenship as a relational practice of just recognition and as a lynchpin of ecological governance that is the focus of my analysis.

However, these background considerations should be pushed one step further. The ethical and philosophical rationales for democratic citizenship as a political identity and as a way of being in the political world have taken several different forms. At present, three modes of democratic membership and practice are predominant. These are liberal citizenship, civic republican citizenship, and deliberative—or, as I prefer to say—discursive citizenship.15

Liberal (contractarian and utilitarian) theories treat citizenship as a legal status attached to particular rights and privileges. Important among them are the voting franchise, eligibility to stand for some elective offices, and equal protection under the law. One need not exercise these rights to be a citizen so long as they are in the background, providing protection and security against violence, trespass, and unjust discrimination. This is in keeping with the general orientation of liberalism in which politics is primarily an instrument for protecting the interests of individuals—separately or collectively. Republican theories have a more holistic conception of citizenship as a political activity more than a legal status and a more developmental view of citizenship as a learning experience furthering the realization of genuine freedom and self-determination by individuals and communities. Being a citizen means more than passive security and private productivity or enjoyment; it requires active engagement and participation in joint efforts to promote the common good. Finally, discursive citizenship consists in offering reasonable justifications for public policies and patterns of activity through public argument and dialogue between and among fellow citizens. Political theorist John Dryzek defines discursive citizenship as a political practice that is:

pluralistic in embracing the necessity to communicate across difference without erasing difference, reflexive in its questioning orientation to established traditions..., transnational in its capacity to extend across state boundaries into settings where there is no constitutional framework, ecological in terms of openness to communication with non-human nature, and dynamic in its openness to ever-changing constraints upon and opportunities for democratization.16

Liberal citizenship builds on the root notion that human beings are acquisitive and competitive beings. Civic republicanism builds on the notion that human beings are relational but hesitates to specify the normative content of key political and social relationships, lest doing so would introduce a hierarchy of wisdom or virtue and undermine civic humanism’s strong egalitarian and popular bent. Discursive citizenship sees the communicative dimension of human being and becoming—specifically, the offering of a public and reasoned justification for actions—as the core of citizenship, which is a relational practice of recognition.17 This emphasis on the process and dynamics of deliberation, argumentation, and justification resolves the dilemma of civic humanism because it brings
substantive ethical norms and standards to bear on social and political relationality via the dynamics of human language rather than via the authority of exceptional individual minds or characters. Governance and justice through the learning and consensus-building power of free and equal political argument and communication obviates the need for a Philosopher King.

A communion of friends reminds us of our interdependence, but an assembly of citizens must be devoted to thinking and acting impartially on behalf of...the common good.

Speaking of Philosopher Kings, prior to modern times, most political philosophers followed Plato in seeing democracies as inherently unstable and self-destructive because both the competitiveness and the relationality of human beings can lead to impulsive actions and self-deluding beliefs. In short, rule of the many (the people; the demos) is prone to becoming rule of the mob (ochlocracy). Then it must give way to rule of the few or the one (oligarchy or monarchy). Mobs don’t really govern; they tear down and end up eventually empowering seductive autocrats or tyrants. The notion of a democratic governance that requires affirmation by a process of consensus building around reasoned public arguments of justification offers a check on the dangers of impulsive and fanatical waves of non-rational, emotional enthusiasm in politics.

For their part, non-democratic conservatives have been open to the charge that their favored mode of politics is overly hidebound and causes the society or people it governs to miss important benefits of innovation and social change. Discursive citizenship may have an answer to this line of criticism, as well, because a genuinely democratic and open political contest between various reasons for justified action can be expected to result in a well-rounded consensus, not one impulsive or skewed. This practice of citizenship preserves social cohesion and continuity and also promotes innovative learning and change.

Moreover, the practice of discursive citizenship shapes a democratic governance, making it functional and stable as well as self-correcting, socially intelligent, and capable of civic learning. The contest of well-reasoned justifications strengthens a mutual recognition among citizens in light of common rights, values, and well-being. Recognizing the commonality of the common good is a precious and hard-won achievement in politics, for it staves off the mistake of projecting particularistic interests onto the notion of the common good. When this projection takes over, politics degenerates into a struggle to control the definition of the common good rather than a contest to determine the best rationale and justification of a proposed contribution to the common good. Discursive citizenship practice promotes the growth of tolerance, cooperation, integrity preserving compromise, respect, and positive regard for individual and group diversity.

This kind of political education involves knowledge, judgment, and character not gained by academic training but only through the participatory exercise of democratic citizenship itself. This makes the judgment of discursive citizens quite different from professional expertise. Citizenship is a practice that can be assessed only by evaluating patterns of judgment and conduct over time. Citizens act toward the future by learning from past successes and mistakes. This makes citizenship dangerous when it becomes absolutist and dogmatic because profound and incorrigible mistakes can be made. On the other hand, civic learning by argument and consensus formation is deliberate but not necessarily speedy. One consideration favoring politically insulated but still accountable expert elite governance over democratic governance is that climate change and other pending crises do not provide enough time for the incremental and pragmatic approach of deliberative citizenship democracy.18

If current conditions are undermining the norms and practices of democratic citizenship in certain ways, how can we reconstruct its norms and repair
officials often hear citizens in the audience say something like, “Remember, you work for me (us).” And the activity of citizenship is defined by a structure of social rules and norms—ethical and political expectations and responsibilities. Participatory systems of citizenship tend to impose more expectations and duties of this kind than do more passive and liberal systems, but across the board, to be a citizen is to carry responsibilities and duties owed to others and to the nation, city, or town (or watershed, landscape, or ecosystem) to which you belong.

For the civic domain to serve and support any one species, it must include—make civic space for, give moral recognition to—an entire functioning web of many species.

Moreover, social structures and cultural meanings shape the norms and values informing the practices of recognition embedded in citizenship at any given time and place. Some such practices take place among members who are acquainted in commonly defined associations, and some involve mutuality among strangers. What distinguishes citizenship from closely related ties—such as kinship, friendship, and shared life experiences like military service—is its tendency to encompass the impersonal and the general in human life. Citizenship is an idea of connection that cuts across friend and stranger to embrace both those in whom one recognizes oneself and those in whose face one sees the vast diversity of humankind. A communion of friends reminds us of our interdependence, but an assembly of citizens must be devoted to thinking and acting impartially on behalf of the general will or the common good, for that is what a democracy entrusts its citizens with.

Citizenship is a practice of recognition. It is closely aligned especially with two other practices of recognition—solidarity and care. Solidarity involves the affirmation of the moral and the civic standing of others, especially those whose standing is being
denied or is going unrecognized. It is a recognition of common membership at many levels, as citizens in a polity, as colleagues or comrades in a common endeavor, as fellow human beings, and, in what might be called ecological solidarity, as members of a symbiotic interspecies web of life. On the other hand, care is recognition centered on paying attention to others, tending to their dignity and need. In light of these perspectives, my argument is that citizenship can itself be seen as a practice of recognition through avowal of (that is, by openly embracing and taking responsibility for) the conditions required for other relational practices, such as solidarity and care, to be pursued. Taken together, the social, cultural, and material requirements of all the practices of recognition in a society is the common good of that society. Superintending the affirmation of and attention paid to the common good is the core of the practice of citizenship. Put differently, discursive democratic citizenship as a practice of recognition integrates the values inherent in other modes of moral recognition of others, especially solidarity and care—affirmation and attention—by various modes of avowal and the fulfillment of public trust.

All practices of recognition start with a specific stance and posture. Solidarity is standing up beside. Care is paying attention to. The posture of democratic citizenship is avowal of rights and obligations of membership in a civic community—my membership, your membership, our membership.

Avowal connotes both making a commitment (taking a vow) and making a public declaration concerning something (avowing one’s support for someone or something). The stakes of associational civic membership involve taking on a trust, publicly declaring a moral understanding of future action within the context of a particular social and institutional role, and striving to critically assess various arguments of justification against a standard of reasonableness and a discipline of uncoerced consensus.

Like standing up and paying attention, avowing is declaring and enacting in plain sight an attachment of self to others, but unlike other practices of public recognition, the attachment of trust is taken on as a dialogical commitment and is mediated through collective institutional structures. I promise my attachment to my fellow citizens (and to non-citizens whose well-being has also been entrusted to those in public authority), not as a unique individual, nor as a representative of your kind, but as a fellow member of a We larger than either of us, but not larger than all of us. When ten people lift a heavy object, it is not ten liftings, but one. Yet the one lift could not exist without the lifting ten. That is the essential insight upon which discursive citizenship rests and ecological citizenship builds.

Membership in a civic association entails the activity of associating or doing one’s fair share as a member of something larger than oneself. As previously noted, this sets discursive citizenship off from liberal citizenship understood primarily as a bundle of personal rights and liberties. The rationale of such membership is not instrumental competition for power, wealth, or status. Nor is it the intrinsic value of doing one’s duty owed to the humanity of others, per se. Instead, it is the moral and political goodness of a civic way of living and the shared promise of human self-realization through interdependence.

Construing membership as a practice rather than a status opens the way to what might be called an “ecological turn” in an understanding of citizenship because it sets aside the claim of evolutionary superiority of the human species and brings to the fore the notion of ontological entanglement or the human immersion in a living world of diversity and plurality. The question asked for centuries—what kind of being is fit to be a citizen (fit to be entrusted with authority and rule)?—gives way to the question of what kind of being does the association need if it is to be both sustainable and legitimate?

The former question has historically excluded many classes of human beings. It has also taken for granted that non-human beings could not be part of the demos and were outside the boundaries of the political community—that they were in
A practical and theoretical merger of discursive democratic citizenship and ecological democratic citizenship is taking place in climate action politics around the world.

Dworkin may or may not have been thinking explicitly about recognition of the moral standing of non-human creatures when he made that remark, but on the other hand there is no particular reason why he would have used the term “creature” unless he meant to broaden membership in a community of beings who have moral standing in relation to one another. Whatever his intent, I believe that the criterion he mentions is the basis for a practice of recognition that we can use in the discourse of ecological solidarity, ecological care, and ecological citizenship. With non-human beings and the ecosystems that make their lives (and ours) possible, it is intrinsically, objectively important how their lives go—how well they are allowed to actualize the potential capabilities of their kind. To deny that recognition to other human beings is to take them out of the realm of morality as subjects and to place them as objects in the domain of mere utility—an instrumental worth. The traditional Western worldview has sanctioned doing precisely that when it comes to nature, natural resources, or the “environment.” The core rationale of ecological political theory and ecological citizenship is to reimagine the Earth as a spaceship rather than a slave ship.

The species being and flourishing of all creatures, including human beings, is interdependent and functional within a complex web of biophysical and symbiotic interactions on different scales, from the planetary to the microbiomic. This is an ontological claim about relationality, and it has a clear ethical analogue. A civic association or a democratic community should define membership inclusively, and in this sense embrace the ecological turn in its understanding of citizenship. If one were to predicate membership in a civic association on the biology of one species (let us say, in keeping with the Western tradition, the genetic inheritance and biological traits of human beings) in isolation from this ecological nexus, then the latent potentialities and development of members of that species could not be actualized as functional capabilities within such a grouping or association. Hence, the association would not be able to meet its members’ needs or respect their rights. It would be a moral failure. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum explains the rationale behind this conclusion:

Once we understand that the point of justice is to secure a dignified life for many different kinds of being, why shouldn’t [justice] include nonhuman beings as full-fledged subjects…. The general aim of [a just] human-animal relationship… would be that no sentient animal should be cut off from the chance for a flourishing life, a life with the type of dignity relevant to that species, and that all sentient animals should enjoy certain
positive opportunities to flourish. With due respect for a world that contains many forms of life, we attend with ethical concern to each characteristic type of flourishing, and strive that it not be cut off or fruitless.  

For the civic domain to serve and support any one species, it must include—make civic space for, give moral recognition to—an entire functioning web of many species. To view human beings as citizen members of the political community for the purposes of governmental decision making, it is also necessary to recognize the moral standing of non-human species and ecological systems as citizens for the purposes of meeting the needs and promoting the flourishing of a full range of species-appropriate capabilities.

Ecosystems as functioning entities must be included in this line of argument because they also have potential and actualizable capabilities integral to the flourishing of individual plants and animals and of human beings. Hence, they have needs and vulnerabilities that must be taken into consideration in ecological governance conducted by human citizens on behalf of the entire political community.

The citizenship entitlement of non-human beings flows from the contribution they make and essential role they play in the community of life within which the civic community (including its human members) is nested. But that is what the citizenship recognition of human beings is based upon also. To be sure, non-human citizens do not directly participate in the discursive argument and justification process of democratic governance, although their needs and interests can be represented there, but it is their worldly presence, their metabolism, their agency through evolved biochemical capabilities and behavioral repertoires, that provides the material and substantive value content to those arguments and justifications made by human citizens entrusted with care for the living world and with the maintenance of its resilience and flourishing.

CIVILIZATIONAL AND TRUST
Democratic citizenship—especially discursive and ecological citizenship—is a practice of complex and reciprocal recognition of fellow citizens as bearers and avowers of civic trust. Practices of democratic citizenship foster a sense of trusteeship on the part of all individual members for the well-being of the association as a whole and its exemplification of justice. These practices depend upon a supportive political, social, and cultural environment. Citizenship and trusteeship either shut down or go into hiding during the breakdown of social and political systems—under conditions of excessive fear, anxiety, widespread and reasonable suspicion, mistrust, criminal or military violence, and the arbitrary exercise of state power. Citizenship also falters in the face of economic destitution and social marginalization and under the weight of widespread discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. Supportive conditions, on the other hand, include hope and progress toward human rights, civil liberties, impartial justice, and equality under the law.

Citizenship is fundamentally self-reflexive in a way many other offices and roles are not. It is not limited to a job description comprised of a discrete set of roles and responsibilities. Its responsibility is to define responsibility and set its bounds. To be a citizen is to be entrusted in time, but also in a sense to be entrusted with time. To be a citizen is to face up to or recognize one’s own trusteeship and to avow it in a dynamic and recurring way. Citizens therefore recognize themselves in a temporal line in which authority is handed down to them and must be passed along from them to those awaiting it, tomorrow, in the next decade, and at the end of the current century. Different political issues have different temporalities and geo-physical rhythms. To be a citizen is to be entrusted in many times—time present, past, and to come. Bloggers, voters, and ecosystems all react to the use of political power and authority, but at different speeds.

Citizenship as a practice of recognition is fundamentally entrusted with sustaining cognate practices of recognition and with the common good, which is the focal point where all right recognitions and right relationships in an ecologically embedded political community converge. There is no precise specification of what sustaining
and superintending the common good entails. Practices of citizenship that keep faith with the trust bestowed upon them are dynamic, developmental, aspirational, and circumstantial. But two things, by way of conclusion, can be suggested.

First, the public trust bestowed on discursive and ecological citizenship is intergenerational. Resolute caring for the common good of presently alive beings is not enough; just as present non-humans must be included in the civic body by dint of their intrinsic value, in themselves and to the entire community of life, so, too, not-yet-existing beings—both human and non-human—must be taken into moral consideration, as well. Thus being entrusted with the well-being of the present alone is not a full specification of this burden and expectation of citizenship, for the endowment of trust extends to the realization of a better future, too.

Second, a practical and theoretical merger of discursive democratic citizenship and ecological democratic citizenship is taking place in climate action politics around the world. Heretofore, people have been adept at re-fabricating and utilizing non-human nature to serve human ends. With the advent of discursive democratic citizenship as a just recognition of ecological agency, capability, and goodness, we may learn how to use our talents in more trustworthy ways and live up to that which democratic citizenship avows.

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NOTES

6. Thomas Berry proposed this terminology: “I suggest the name ‘Ecozoic’ as a better designation than ‘Ecological.’ Eco-logos refers to an understanding of the interaction of things. Eco-zoic is a more biological term that can be used to indicate the integral functioning of life systems in their mutually enhancing relations.” T. Berry, “The Ecozoic Era,” Eleventh Annual E.F. Schumacher Lecture, ed. H. Hannum, delivered October 1991 at John Dewey Academy, Great Barrington, MA, https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/the-ecozoic-era/.
8. My discussion of subjunctive conceptions is drawn from Adam Seligman and colleagues, who have studied two different forms of framing experience: ritual and sincerity. They propose that “ritual and sincerity shape group and individual boundaries to create very different modes of empathy and interaction.” A.B. Seligman, R.P. Weller, M.J. Puett, and B. Simon, Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6. Ritual creates an “as if” or “could be” world of shared aspirations and possibilities—in other words, a “shared subjunctive.” (Ibid., 7-8) They further argue that the pursuit of the good requires a shared subjunctive—a shared sense that things could be otherwise and better—in order to create a political community where people live as if the good were achievable. By contrast, sincerity is an approach to the world, including the political world, based on a declarative “as is” vision rather than a subjunctive “as if” vision. This shared declarative tends to be totalizing and absolutist—an unambiguous vision of reality “as it really is.” Historical and ethical treatments of citizenship law, naturalization, and immigration policy conducted in a declarative, “as is” fashion reveal a terrible record of racism, favoritism, prejudice, and discrimination. For a study of these matters in the United States, see R.M. Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
10. J.R. MacNeill, and P. Engelke, The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); P. Krugman, The Great Unraveling: Losing Our Way in the New Century (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); G. Packer, The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013). At the core of this crisis lies the suspicion that the traditional categories of political knowledge and sensibility have become outmoded by the virtually unprecedented social realities of the modern world. The discourse of the past seems to offer us little, if any, political education; neither does it seem to provide us with that enabling act of mind necessary for an understanding of the present or an aspiration toward the future. Intellectually, we stand poised between the antiseptic language of technocratic jargon on one side and a rhetoric of nostalgia on the other.

14. W.H. Auden in a poem of exquisite irony, “The Unknown Citizen” (1939), shows what a problematic and debased meaning the term “citizen” can have when used merely as a bureaucratic honorific. Couched as an official administrative encomium, the poem reviews the conduct of a man named and remembered by a number. His was a life of passivity, conformity, and apolitical routine. The “absurd” question of human meaning and experience in such a life—“Was he free? Was he happy?”—is answerable only by reference to the system of seemingly benign but essentially totalitarian surveillance (“had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard”). Cosmopolitan humanism would provide one alternative standard of judgment with which to evaluate such a life and such a system; the tradition of civil humanism and citizenship that I am gesturing at here provides another. I am not sure where Auden comes down on this, but as I read the poem, at least, it provides support for saying that JS/07M/378 was not a citizen at all in any meaningful sense of the term. His outer social circumstances did not permit it, and perhaps his inner resources, having never had an opportunity to experience the bios politikos, were not conducive to it, either.


Planet Earth, turning and turning, transmutes the rays of the Sun into a dazzling multiplicity of form and expression, an alchemy of tassel and leaf, fin and feather, eye and bone; all are progeny of a planet in reverie. And the dream becomes life in its full tapestry.

The human, born from millennia of Earth’s invention, trial, creativity, struggle, and increasing complexity, is the ultimate dream animal. Of all Earth’s species, we are the lucid dreamer, the dreamer who watches the dream. Through the profound mystery of conscious self-awareness, the human reaches a depth of seeing never before achieved in the history of life; and depth of seeing is depth of being. Our gaze is Earth’s gaze. It is a gaze into the mirror at the planet’s beauty and diversity of life, but also to destruction and loss at human hands. The gaze is also an outward gaze, one that penetrates to the stars from which we’ve been created, and to the beginnings of time itself.

When I was an undergraduate, I took up birdwatching. Birds were on my radar as I grew up. I knew the common species. However, I had never actively and systematically sought them out. Every break from the books found me out in the fields and forests for hours in search of new species to add to what birders refer to as the “life list.” I quantified, categorized, and made notes as any dutiful student of the natural world would.

One summer afternoon I headed for one of my favorite spots, a pristine stretch of creek that ran aboveground for several miles. The creek was shrouded by mixed deciduous woodlands for the entire stretch. I made my way for some time through this green arcade until I reached a small sandy area underneath an embankment along the creek. A weathered and sun-drenched log was the perfect spot for a rest.

The log warmed my back. Although it was a nearly windless day, the leaves began to move in a fantastic, sunlit dance. I felt the embrace of birch, elm, and willow as their sway and flutter came alive within me. The landscape seemed to radiate from within. The creek, following its natural course, was as alive in
its relationship to its stony bed as the juncos were to the elm branch on the bank opposite me.

In my total absorption, the arrival of a night heron seemed natural, a perfect enhancement of the vivid dance. Her graceful glide and landing created a quiet joy within me. The heron fished, stalked the bank, and groomed herself in the shade of creek-side willows. I slipped beyond an awareness of time.

Heading home toward dusk I realized that the yellow-crowned night heron was a new bird on my list. But somehow that felt secondary. I had internalized a more primary knowledge, a seeing beyond intellect, a total immersion in the vitality of another being. That afternoon ruined me for birding in the way I had been accustomed. On subsequent birding trips, I was less absorbed in my “life list,” and more in the unique presence of individual birds, whatever the species.

To feel internally the heron foraging, or the fronds of birch swaying, or the hawk soaring, or the salmon driving upstream, is to be freed momentarily from the blindness of a more conditioned self. In this freedom, there is a deepened capacity to see, to discern. Something that stirs in the breast of a hawk soaring has its equivalent in human joy. Something in the body of a salmon knifing upstream has its equivalent as human intent. And the heron foraging? Perhaps something as yet unnamed.

**DISCERNMENT**

“The whole of life lies in seeing,” wrote paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes at the heart of a cosmos where it is always possible to discern more.” Discerning more, for the human, is seeing outside the confines of the conditioned self. Doing so brings us into a relationship with a reality that is beyond the limitations of symbols and abstraction. It opens the door to beauty and thus, wonder. It brings us into the richness and fullness of the present. And, because we are not in a state of lack or deficiency, it helps us build an immunity to the predations...
of mass culture and ideology, to the beguiling tyranny of demagogues. We see for ourselves.

The unconditioned self is a more primal part of us, a pure and embodied presence to everything around us. It is beyond social conditioning, beyond thought, beyond ideas, beyond words, and most importantly, beyond fear. Fear overrules our more virtuous actions when we are out of touch with this embodied aspect of ourselves. And the more immersed we are in the distractions of our age (for example, the constant connection of our digital world), the more impeded we are in reaching that unconditioned part of ourselves. It is difficult to be fearless if cut off from our grounding in the living world. We struggle to discern wisely what our true loyalties—and, by extension, our most valid actions—should be.

I was once tutored on the importance of discernment by a trout. I was hiking the contours of an eastern Sierra stream not far from Tuolumne Meadows near Yosemite National Park and had stopped to lunch streamside on a large flat boulder. In the stream was a trout, nosing into the current, and yet at the same time suspended, as if on a string. I watched for some time as the trout rose periodically to feed on hatching flies. Although there was a good amount of leaves, twigs, and other debris carried on the stream’s surface, not once did the trout rise to a false meal. There was within the trout a practiced discernment of when and when not to expend energy. When up against a human predator, the fly fisherman, this discernment can mean life or death. In a sense, the challenge of the fly fisherman is to break through the discernment of the trout with the irresistible offering. The fisherman must attempt to see as the trout sees.

I also once experienced discernment in a flock of goldeneyes and pintail ducks. The birds were gathered in large numbers, feeding in Drake’s Bay, an estuary of Point Reyes National Seashore. From a cliff high above, I watched as the entire body of birds suddenly shot into the sky in response to the silhouette of an eagle slipping silently over the lip of the cliff. Moments before I had mistaken the eagle for a turkey vulture, but the water birds had an instant and ancient recognition of the eagle’s dark shape against the sky. Vultures passing overhead, although a similar shape and size to the eagle, hadn’t triggered the same response. It takes energy to flee. Do it too often, when there is no danger, and you may well perish from exhaustion or hunger.

“See or perish,” wrote Teilhard. He saw an increase of consciousness, of vision, as an imperative, not “just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury.” The levels of discernment found in the trout and the duck, in all of life, have their equivalent in the human. In the trajectory of evolution, depth of seeing has complexified in the human being into conscious self-awareness. In the human, sight has become insight. We have become the way in which the planet perceives and reflects on its own being.
In this conscious self-awareness, we come into possession of the awesome responsibility of human choice, and the choices we make have an impact on the whole of the planet. Much of natural selection has now been usurped by human decision. If we cannot adequately discern the dangers of our current over-exploitation of the planet, we cannot choose wisely. If we cannot make the ground of our existence—the natural world—our primary loyalty, we will not survive in the long term.

**UNCONSCIOUS ALLEGIANCES AND CULTURAL REVERIES**

Increased depth of seeing in the human serves to bring to light our unconscious allegiances. Those allegiances—whether they be to ideology, power, money, success, fame, or some ideal of physical beauty or immortality—shackle us to constant desire, to a sense of lack. They form a kind of central dream of our life which is often not apparent to us. One of the most powerful unconscious allegiances of our time is anthropocentrism. Its mystique has such a powerful hold on us precisely because—in the Western mind at least—it remains largely unconscious and automatic. Even for the well-meaning and aware citizen, this mystique is difficult to overcome.

These allegiances are very powerful because they come out of our landscape of formation. They have their source in our earliest experiences and create what Argentinian philosopher Silo (Mario Luis Rodríguez Cobos) identified as the “primary reveries” of our lives. Our primary reveries are largely subconscious catalysts for our actions and decisions. They rarely operate on the level of everyday awareness. They may slip through to our awareness in moments of dropping off to sleep or waking, but they remain hidden to us most of the time. And yet they determine to a very great extent how we view the world, and often they blind us not only to valid action, but to the truth, even when we are confronted with it. Once we become aware of our primary reveries and the “reverie nucleus” (central daydream) guiding our decisions and our emotional orientation to the world, we can find more freedom in our actions. The term nucleus is apt because the nucleus of the cell is not only central...
and internal to a cell, it regulates the cell’s activities. Silo posits that the reverie nucleus normally changes as a human being matures, but it can get lodged in an earlier life stage and cause a person to repeat beliefs and patterns of behavior that haven’t evolved with a constantly changing world.4

In the Western world, we have difficulty seeing the mutuality of our relationship to the rest of the world because of the way we are brought up, our landscape of formation. The establishment of our primary reveries and the reverie nucleus makes it difficult for us to see things differently. To be in mutually beneficial relations with the non-human is an alien feeling for us. So, for example, in terms of climate change, even when faced with stark facts, if they don’t resonate with a primary cultural reverie of a prosperous wonderworld, unlimited growth, and unfettered capitalism, they may not feel particularly real. Anthropogenic causes of climate change won’t register as important, or register at all. Climate denial may not be so much willful as being stuck in maladaptive repetitions of belief and behavior.

A reverie nucleus won’t change simply through intellectual discernment. It has to change through efforts that transform the basic psychological and emotional climate of an individual. There are two points in time when a reverie nucleus might change. The first is during the time of a major developmental transition in life, for example, from childhood to adolescence. This underscores the importance of rites of initiation for boys and girls as they approach adolescence. If a child is brought up to form an inner life that has resonance with the natural forms and primary relationships around him or her, an initiation will ripen a sense of interconnection throughout adolescence and into adulthood. The second impetus for change is through a significant shock, an event or life change where the reverie nucleus destabilizes and reforms in response to a powerful experience that changes one’s worldview.5

Writing about the importance of the natural world in the transition from childhood to adolescence, the professor of natural philosophy and human ecology, Paul Shepard, observed: “In the West, it is the failure of the adolescent’s religious mentors...to translate his [her] confidence in people and the Earth into a more conscious, more cosmic view, in which he [she] broadens his [her] buoyant faith to include the universe.”6 If we don’t have an eco-cosmological basis within our landscape of formation, and if our unconscious allegiances—the things that we “worship”—are self-oriented, then we will fail to recognize that our actions are connected in any tangible sense to the wider world. We become alienated when we begin to believe the fiction provided by the dominant cultural reverie: that maturity means to “grow up” and acknowledge that the natural world is essentially without value unless for human use or as constituted by human consciousness. Everything outside human value feels like an abstraction, and our behavior follows suit. When something feels like an abstraction, no matter how soundly reasoned, it has much less persuasive energy around it. The Latin origin of the word abstraction is “to draw away from.” When we abstract the natural world, the next step is to objectification. It is much easier to give one’s assent to the destruction of something abstracted to the point of being an object.

A primary reverie, whether personal or cultural, is essentially an unconscious attempt to make up for a deficiency in the fulfillment of a particular need. It could be something more basic like the need for food, health, safety, or shelter, but it could also be the need for acceptance or approval by a social, familial, or religious group. One way to break through a dominant cultural reverie is to develop the capacity for really seeing our unconscious allegiances for what they are and realizing how they constrict our larger freedom as human beings. Shedding light on the hidden parts of ourselves that keep us captive within a realm of secondary concerns is the first step toward deeper seeing—which is a more refined discernment, and which becomes wisdom when internalized. This can be a lifelong process of maturation. The best starting point for greater discernment is with children. Their context—a maternal bond where they feel held and thus safe to explore, direct contact with natural forms, and the power of story grounded in evolutionary cosmology—allows them to build their interiority upon a landscape of formation that will connect them to something transcending the self.

The most powerful way to break through abstraction and denial is through direct contact with the tangible, ordinary reality of the natural world. This contact gives children a felt sense that they are not only on Earth, but that they are Earth, and that the planet is self-aware through their own senses and consciousness. If a relationship isn’t felt, it atrophies. Without that felt sense, an assumption begins to take root that the only way to know the planet, a tree, an animal, another human being, is through the mind. Conscious self-awareness, as the deepest level of seeing yet to emerge in the evolution of the Earth community, cuts through that kind of objectification. You are not simply a subject perceiving the beauty and grandeur of the planet, you are the planet feeling its own beauty and grandeur. Through this kind of felt relationship, children can grow into an ever-expanding communion over the course of a lifetime, becoming adults who are more deeply initiated over time into
the mysteries of ecological citizenship. This is the basis for the cosmic citizen, the truly mature human. It is also the basis for trust, which is key to a child’s feeling secure in their existence. A child initiated into the mysteries of the universe and the powers and graces of the natural world can build confidence in the future and her role in it.

Ecological grounding gives children a sense of where they are, of place, of how they are related to the other-than-human. Cosmological grounding gives the child a sense of when they are, and how they are related to the creative arc of the universe through time. In the Western world, we went from a sense of time as cyclical—connected to the seasons and the movement of heavenly bodies—to a sense of time in the Industrial Age that is linear and tied to the hands of the clock. Evolutionary science and cosmology is presenting us with a sense of time as developmental, unfolding, and creative. A whole constellation of discoveries coming in from physics and astronomy will need to be transitioned from scientific cosmology into a cultural cosmology—a story that meaningfully portrays us as creative participants in an expanding universe and evolving cosmos.

Both ecological and cosmological grounding are necessary, and they are deeply interrelated. Divorcing them has given us such false dichotomies as that between ecological and social justice. Both groundings are part of a continuum of the human maturing beyond a limited parochial perspective; they are not separate concerns. The ecological/social justice dichotomy is especially crippling for a society that aspires to democracy in any meaningful sense, and it is one of the key reasons democracy is failing in America in the year 2020. The very faltering of the Western democratic tradition is due to its failure from the start to draw on the foundations of ecology and cosmology. A false discontinuity between human rights and rights for all nature is the result. You can have one but not the other, we grow up to believe; but when you feel yourself within an eco-cosmological reality, you can’t have one without the other.

The failure of our educational and religious institutions to initiate children into the mysteries of the planet and the universe is a key driver of this false dichotomy. Children who grow up not only with a sense of place, but of story (participating in a creative, time-developmental universe) will understand the connection innately. They will realize that to be informed citizens is to be part of a biocracy where rights extend to non-human species, landscapes, and watersheds. To afford these rights expands the overall potential of the whole to thrive. While there is no guarantee that any individual child will grow into a more mature, ecological citizen with a broader, expanded circle of concern, it is nevertheless necessary in order to provide a background reverie and formative landscape from which extra-human empathy has the potential to evolve. The acquisition of new, ever-deepening sensitivities in the human person is a refinement of seeing, an impulse that helps drive evolution forward. Chief among these new sensitivities is reverence for life.

This is why contact with nature is so crucial for children during their formative years. If a child hasn’t been brought into proper relationship to the Earth, or even his or her own mother’s embrace, how will he/she ever feel the larger maternal embrace of the universe? The diversity of the planet enriches the interiority and the potential of the human, and it is through deepening communion as we age that we are brought into an ever-widening circle of freedom. That’s what creates meaning as we grow. The formative connections of our childhood season and deepen. The ultimate source of meaning for the mature human is liberty from limiting identifications that fall short of our potential as individuals and as a species. Ecological citizenship finds its most mature expression in the cosmic citizen.

HABITAT AND THE ECOLOGICAL CITIZEN

Some years ago, I interviewed environmental author and climate change activist Bill McKibben on themes from a less-well-known book of his, The Age of Missing Information. In that book, McKibben relates a kind of experiment in which he subjected himself to the constant programming of over ninety cable television channels over a period of about a week. Then he spent an equivalent amount of time on a mountaintop in the wild of the Adirondacks. He compared the experiences and their impact on his emotional and psychological state. When I asked him what he hoped to find, here’s what he said in the interview:

I wanted to understand the ideology of the time, which didn’t seem to be political ideology really, but a consumer one. TV somehow seemed key to all that. So I watched all that endless TV and spent all that time outdoors. If you had to boil the whole thing down to one idea—an idea that TV spreads with incredible efficiency—it’s that we are the most important things in the world, we’re the center, each one of us as individuals is incredibly important. All our wants should be gratified. We should be amused at all times. That’s what life is about. It’s sort of the ideology of the suburb, the ideology of Disneyland. I came to understand this ideology as being very much against both an ecological worldview, and a religious worldview. These are world views where we’re not the center of everything.
McKibben went on to share something he noticed about the children in his area. Whereas he remembered running around the trails of the Adirondacks as a boy, almost constantly out in the natural world, he noticed that the kids now were inside most of the time, in front of their video games and TVs. He came to see that “TV was a place where children live.”

Not only does a predominance of television as the primary way to mediate reality make us more self-centered, it becomes a kind of habitat in which we live. Natural habitat provides sustenance, shelter, the matrix of natural forms within which we reproduce and thrive. It is, therefore, a key element in our landscape of formation. Today’s virtual world, the internet, social media, and devices only added to the canon of distraction. My interview with McKibben predated the time of smartphones and the prevalence of computers. Today, the vast proliferation of devices has been characterized by author Cory Doctorow as an “ecosystem of interruption technologies.” The internet, whatever its benefits for global connection, has ushered in an eerie kind of disembodied placelessness, where we begin to feel that we physically and psychically exist somewhere out in cyberspace. The implication of this on the consciousness of our young is enormous. The virtual world should only be one part of the habitat (and of the landscape of formation) of a child, not the primary context for forming relationships—and, by extension, empathy—beyond the human.

A NEW CULTURAL REVERIE

Former 2020 U.S. presidential candidate and author Marianne Williamson stated that her administration’s highest priority would be the creation of a cabinet-level U.S. Department of Children and Youth to “address the trauma of millions of American children” with the end of “helping them become productive citizens in the 21st century.” At the foundation of that trauma is neglect, says Williamson, a failure to provide children with the resources they need to thrive.

Children need to have their primary needs fulfilled as part of the process of nurturing the whole of their person. They need to grow up in a safe, nurturing environment with enough nutritional food, shelter, and health care, free from the insecurity of gun violence and bullying in their schools and homes. Unarticulated (but not necessarily absent) in Williamson’s vision for children is a grounding in ecology and evolutionary cosmology. To expand on her vision, there should be a special emphasis on providing not just an ecological perspective as the foundation for all learning, but an eco-cosmological education in which the child learns that she is the planet aware of herself, and that she is an integral part of a much grander story that is still unfolding and complexifying in time. For such a cabinet-level department to be effective, it should have ecology and cosmology as foundational components. A child with an understanding of a unifying evolutionary cosmology and the dynamics of an unfolding universe will carry an awareness of the possibilities of the human as a positive agent through deep time. Ecology will ground children in a sense of place and an understanding of the interrelationships of all life on the planet. Given this context, they will have the strength to combat despair and the internal resources to cope with the severity of climate change, the irreversible loss of species, and an ecologically compromised planet.

For adults, a matrix of nationwide teach-ins and citizens’ circles are needed to deepen understanding of the nature of citizenship, ecology, cosmology, economics, and politics and to counter the dominant narrative of alienation from the natural world. If adults can understand the connections between making a living and larger economic forces more clearly, they can begin to see beyond their general sense of betrayal by politicians and policymakers. They can begin to discern
the dominant cultural reveries of anthropocentrism, mono-
theism, male domination, and distrust of the body as a way of
knowing. Western society’s enthronement of reason over other
ways of knowing and a related central belief that the human is
the measure of all ultimate value has created a cultural reverie
that defaults to domination of nature in situations where social
and ecological justice come into conflict. The fact that this is
a false contradiction is lost because of the powers of a largely
tacit belief inculcated in children from their earliest formative
stages of life and on into adulthood.

Until we have the will to revamp the cultural reveries of un-
checked consumerism, anthropocentrism, and a denial of the
sacred within and around us, we will be forced to deal with
another contradiction—the one between human viability and
the vibrancy of an Earth community that supports us materi-
ally, psychologically, and spiritually. In the end, even an in-
formed citizenry will only make better choices (in day-to-day
life, in the adoption and use of technologies, and at the ballot
box) when their primary reveries come not out of a sense of
deficiency, lack, and disconnection, but out of a sense of their
birthright of a vibrant planet and a creative universe. By seeing
more deeply, by increasing the scope of our sensitivities, we
will all come to live more deeply.

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and the human spirit.

NOTES
1. P. Teilhard de Chardin, The Human Phenomenon (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press,
1999), 3.
2. Ibid
227.
5. Ibid.
added.
7. B.T. Swimme and M.E. Tucker, Journey of the Universe (New Haven, CT: Yale University
8. The significant impact of cosmology on culture is beyond the scope of this essay;
however, groundwork for further exploration has been laid by Nicholas Campion. See
N. Campion, “The Importance of Cosmology in Culture: Contexts and Consequences,”
chapter 1 in Trends in Modern Cosmology, ed. A. Capistrano, (London: InTechOpen, 2017),
http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/67976.
9. H. Skolomowski, The Theatre of the Mind (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House,
1984), 29.
Boer, EarthLight Magazine no. 31 (Fall 1998): 10-11, 19.
Can we view animals as citizens, and if so, would this help us to achieve interspecies justice and ecological renewal? Citizenship has traditionally been seen as exclusively human, but this essay explores emerging theories and practices of animal citizenship and what they can contribute to solving the political and ecological crises of contemporary societies.

Put simply, politics is about how we make decisions that govern and shape our lives together. But who is the “we”? The “we” of political community is not just a random collection of individuals on a geographic territory; it is “a norm-bound community constituted through shared practices and forms of embodied interaction.”1 We can think of citizenship as the formal expression and organization of our membership in a political community—our status of belonging to a “we” with a common fate bound up in doing things together, within a defined jurisdiction, in light of guiding (and evolving) shared norms. Political communities can exist at local and municipal levels, sub-state levels, national and international levels. And while formal citizenship is usually about our membership in a nation or multinational state, we can speak more informally of being a citizen of New York, or Europe, or the world.

Defining the “we” requires defining boundaries, or who belongs, and this raises worries. History is one long litany of unjust forms of external and internal exclusion from citizenship, and this should make us cautious when defining insiders and outsiders. But we shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking that boundaries are inherently hostile, separating friends and enemies. I belong to a family. You belong to a different family. This doesn’t make us enemies, and it doesn’t mean we can’t work together on matters of joint interest or desire. It simply means we are part of different communities of belonging when it comes to family life. Boundaries are often messy, contested, and prone to descent into chauvinism (I will advance my family, neighborhood, or country at the expense of yours!). But they are also a precondition for being able to create and shape a life together, for being a self-determining “we”—whether at the level of family, neighborhood, city, nation, or federation of states or peoples.

That’s the “we,” but there’s also the “how” of citizenship. How do we make decisions together? This is one of the key norms shaping a political community, and it is at this point that democratic citizenship enters the conversation. The democratic ethos (in contrast with autocracy or oligarchy) holds that all
members of a political community should have a say in deliberations and decisions about the values and norms of that community. Everyone who has made a life in the community—and whose fundamental life plans are therefore profoundly shaped by the community’s laws—must have a voice. They all have a stake in how the values, opportunities, benefits, and burdens of communal life are defined and shared. So, returning to the opening definition of politics as being about how we make decisions that shape and govern our lives together, we can see that democratic citizenship is a particular elaboration of both how we make decisions (democratically) and who we are when making those decisions (citizens/members of a bounded state or political community).

**Various theories of “green citizenship” or “ecological citizenship” argue that citizenship should be redefined to include robust responsibilities in relation to nature and animals, but they still reserve the role of citizen to humans.**

Why have I begun this essay with a primer on democratic citizenship? I think these foundational questions about who constitutes the political community and how they make decisions together are crucial for rethinking our relationship with non-human animals and nature. The dominant strand of Western thought is built on the idea of human separation from nature, of human hierarchy over other animals, and of politics as a distinctly human activity. Animals are never considered as part of the self-determining “we” of political community. They may be viewed as objects or resources, suffering victims, ciphers and muses, causal agents, awe-inspiring wildlife, and so on—but they are not seen as political agents engaged in the project of self-rule.

Interestingly, this remains true even within recent attempts to develop a more ecological or post-humanist conception of politics. On the one hand, various theories of “green citizenship” or “ecological citizenship” argue that citizenship should be redefined to include robust responsibilities in relation to nature and animals, but they still reserve the role of citizen to humans on the assumption that only humans can be political agents who engage in collective self-determination. On the other hand, we have contemporary theories of “cosmopolitics,” associated in particular with the new materialism and actor-network theory, which argue that the idea of political agency and collective self-determination is a myth even in the human case, and that machines, plants, animals, and humans are all just nodes in causal networks that are not subject to our collective democratic will. Again, animals and their agency are denied because all intentional, self-determining political agency is placed into doubt by theories of cosmopolitics.

But what if both anthropocentric and cosmopolitical viewpoints are based on a mistake and a morally indefensible exclusion? What if animals are indeed inside politics? Outside the Western tradition, this is a familiar idea. Many Indigenous peoples have long recognized animals as belonging to the world of politics and have strived to establish right relations with animals—at the individual level, and also at the collective level through treaty relationships. For example, the region of Ontario where I live lies within the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg peoples, who, according to Anishinaabeg scholars, have long engaged with the fish nations and the deer, moose, and caribou nations—and many others—as treaty peoples. Humans and animals share in the “one dish,” Gdoo-naaganinaa, in relations of mutual responsibility, and animal nations are competent to regulate their own internal affairs and to negotiate treaties to govern external relations between nations. Moreover, membership in the clan or nation—the key node of citizenship in Anishinaabe politics—isn’t based on blood or species, but on relations of care and responsibility. An animal in need of care (e.g., an orphaned infant) can be adopted into a human clan, just as humans in need of care can be adopted into animal nations. Animals, like humans, are capable of self-determination, of consenting to their associations and relations with others. In other words, they, too, can be at the very heart of a “we” making decisions about how to live together—whether within the nation, or side by side between sovereign nations sharing the same territory.

What would it mean to renew Western political thought in a way that recognizes animals as political agents and members of political communities? In *Zoopolis*, Will Kymlicka and I propose a three-part framework for approaching this question in relation to wild, domesticated, and liminal animals. We argue that wild animals should be recognized as forming sovereign political communities, exercising meaningful jurisdiction over the habitats they occupy and depend upon that must be protected from human invasion, colonization, and resource extraction. This does not rule out all contact and cooperation with, or assistance from, human communities. But it means that our relations must be conducted in ways that respect wild animals’ abilities to live in their territories on their own terms. Thus, our relations with wild animals will vary greatly across
different ecoregions, and this will depend upon the vulnerabil-
ity of the relevant animal nations and potential for mutually
beneficial practices. Many wild animals avoid humans and
cannot thrive in human-built and altered environments—espe-
cially those animals who depend on ecological niches vulnera-
table to even the smallest disturbance. Respecting their rights to
self-determination and to association requires strict limits on
human encroachment through the creation of protected habi-
tats and migration corridors.

Partial, overlapping, and parallel forms of sovereignty are
possible, and indeed necessary, given that ecological regions
of importance to animals don’t correspond neatly with human
political boundaries. For example, we could imagine forms
of parallel sovereignty for the wolves, elk, mountain goats,
grizzlies, and other non-human animals of the Yellowstone
to Yukon corridor alongside the sovereignties of Indigenous
nations and the multination states of Canada and the United
States. The construction of road overpasses, safe corridors,
set-asides of key habitat, and limits on human settlement and
activity already occurring in this region are forerunners of the
kinds of formal and binding nation-to-nation agreements or
treaties that might be negotiated with, and on behalf of, animal
nations. We could imagine similar kinds of parallel or overlap-
ing sovereignty to govern relations between humans and ce-
taceans in the world’s oceans, or with African elephants, whose
range extends across the human states of Angola, Namibia,
Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana. Indeed, some researchers
are exploring models of elephant nationhood.6

What if animals are indeed inside politics?
Outside the Western tradition, this is a
familiar idea.

Now, let’s consider the case of domesticated animals—those
who have been confined and selectively bred to meet human
desires for food, labor, clothing, research, entertainment, and
companionship. As these animals are liberated from human
captivity and exploitation, what should happen to them? Their
numbers will vastly decrease once we cease confinement and
forced reproduction, but they will not disappear. Humans and
domesticated animals are entwined in relations of mutual de-
pendency. Their labor and bodies have created the wealth of our
societies, which belong to them as much as to us. It’s possible,
over time and with support, that some domesticated animals
could withdraw from human society (“re-wild”) in ways that
are safe for them and wouldn’t undermine the sovereignty of
wild animal nations. However, expelling them from the soci-
eties they share with us is not something we have a right to
force on domesticated animals. When a society has created an
underclass, exploiting them for the benefit of favored groups,
justice requires that the oppressed be included in society as full
equals (if that is their choice), not expelled without any say in
the matter. They have a right to citizenship—to be part of the
“we”—sharing in the rights and responsibilities of belonging,
having the opportunity to contribute and have a say.

What would it mean to share a society with domesticated
animals on terms of equal citizenship? Domesticated animals
belong to highly social species—this is what made (co)domes-
tication possible. They are strongly oriented to social norms
(striving to understand, respect, and negotiate the terms of
social interaction), such as cooperation, care, reciprocity, and
respect for legitimate authority. Over millennia, they have
adapted to life with humans in countless ways. We can see this
most easily in the case of dogs, with whom many of us have
direct experience. Dogs have developed ways of communica-
ing with humans, and vice versa (through eye contact, pointing,
barking, interpreting facial expressions, learning via imitation,
etc.). In my experience, many people find the idea of “citizen
canine” quite plausible and appealing.7

The idea that farmed animals, such as cows, chickens and pigs,
could be our co-citizens is greeted with much greater skepti-
cism. In order to feel better about exploiting and killing farmed
animals, humans have constructed elaborate lies about their
alleged stupidity, incompetence, and minimal sentience.8 This
willful and self-serving ignorance is finally being challenged by
a new generation of researchers interested in trying to under-
stand farmed animals on their own terms, rather than simply
studying how better to exploit them.9 And there is some evi-
dence that popular attitudes are also slowly acknowledging
that these animals have rich mental and social lives.

So let us imagine a future where we come to think of the do-
mesticated animals who share our society as our co-citizens.
What will this mean for the homes, cities, workplaces, institu-
tions, practices, and laws of our shared societies? For starters,
car culture might lose precedence to more walk-friendly design
(including public transportation that is safe and function-
al for non-humans). Buildings, grazing spaces, and mobility
corridors suited to hoofed, pawed, and clawed citizens would
devvelop. Rescue services and other essential social supports
(health care, basic income, disability support, education/train-
ing, etc.) would be provided for all. Meanwhile, as the ethical
and environmental catastrophe of animal agriculture makes
way for a new and sustainable food system, millions of hectares of land currently used for feed production and pasturage could be reassigned. This could provide habitat buffer zones and ecological corridors for wild animals and a gradual renewal of biodiversity and ecosystem resiliency.

These are just a few the changes that would follow from recognizing domesticated animals as full members of society, entitled to the same protections and provision as others. But would this really constitute citizenship in a more-than-human society? In what sense can animals participate in decisions affecting their home life, work life, and other activities, let alone the shape and direction of society at a more general level? They can’t engage in traditional voting, so how can they have a say?

Many researchers and activists have begun exploring this question in different contexts, especially family life and the workplace. For example, researchers at the Animal-Computer Interaction Lab at the University of Edinburgh are exploring ways for working dogs to participate in design of the objects and environments they interact with on a daily basis. What kind of technologies can assist dogs who want to open doors, or pick up awkward objects? Or enable horses to tell us if they want to wear blankets or not?

Meanwhile, at sanctuaries for formerly farmed animals, scholars are exploring ways for animals to participate in more communal design and decision-making. In addition to this, democratic theorists are exploring different models for scaling up these experiments—empowering animals to participate in informal democratic fora and to be represented in formal decision procedures. We have only just begun to ask how domesticated animals might want to live their lives, as well as whether this includes us, and if so, where we fit in. Can they be respected as self-determining and competent subjects within shared political communities with humans? How might they seek to transform our shared social world? Or will they, over time, vote with their feet to distance themselves from human political communities, and partially or fully re-wild?

This brings us to the need for a third broad category of human—animal political relations, focused on the many “liminal” animals who operate between the categories of domesticated and wild. They are neither domesticated nor wild animals, who avoid human settlement or fail to thrive in human-altered environments. This category includes many domesticated animals who have rewilded, like feral pigs, cats, dogs, camels, donkeys, pigeons, and others. It also includes animals who have long evolved in symbiosis with human civilization, like rats and mice. And it includes animals of countless other species (e.g., sparrows, vultures, raccoons, coyotes, monkeys) who are adapting well to living alongside industrialized human societies. Thank goodness some animals can adapt in this way because as human populations expand, affecting all corners of the Earth, wild animals who cannot adapt are disappearing at a devastating pace. As we move further into the Anthropocene, it may soon be the case that the only remaining non-domesticated animals left on the planet will be those who can adapt to at least some level of human presence and impact.

The idea that farmed animals, such as cows, chickens and pigs, could be our co-citizens is greeted with much greater skepticism. In order to feel better about exploiting and killing farmed animals, humans have constructed elaborate lies about their alleged stupidity, incompetence, and minimal sentience. But what is the right way to conceive of our political relations with the liminal animals who live alongside us in cities, towns, and the countryside? Humans (and domesticated animals) have important self-determination rights in these locations that must be respected. We cannot simply step away from (or drastically reduce our presence in) these areas, as we can and should do for sovereign wild animal communities. But neither can we incorporate all liminal animals into co-citizenship relations. As noted above, a political community is “a norm-bound community constituted through shared practices and forms of embodied interaction,” and citizenship formalizes this in terms of the rights and responsibilities of all citizens. This includes norms around non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflict, sharing and cooperation, toleration and contribution, and so on. There are many liminal animals who cannot participate with us in such relations. They may be predators (e.g., coyotes, cougars, bears, eagles) who can’t help but pose a danger to humans or domesticated animals. Co-existence with such animals requires respectful distance (living in parallel), not close interaction and cooperation. There are animals whose shelter and foraging practices conflict with human needs—for example, squirrels and raccoons whose nests destroy buildings, mice who eat and spoil food stores, or geese who foul recreation grounds. Again, co-existence with these animals generally requires establishing boundaries—such as by building...
secure structures and food storage or by reducing garbage that promotes population growth—as opposed to greater inclusion in shared practices and embodied interaction.

Nonetheless, liminal animals have as much right as we do to live self-determining lives on the territories they occupy. Indeed, in many cases, their presence (qua species) long precedes human settlement. In Zoopolis we propose a form of political “denizenship” for this group of animals. Denizenship is a framework for respecting the right to residency (e.g., not being subject to denigration, stigma, expulsion, violence); to protection from theft of the means of life (e.g., habitat, clean water, etc.); to reasonable accommodations (e.g., building codes that limit bird strikes and light pollution, travel corridors to mitigate car perils, rescue/rehab centres to mitigate human-caused harms); and, in general, to a political process that recognizes the needs of both liminal animals and humans, their potential for conflict, and the search for co-existence strategies to limit such conflicts.14

This does not mean that our interactions with liminal animals are restricted to bare toleration and accommodation. Reasonable accommodation provides a minimal threshold of respectful relations, not a fixed cap. The category of liminal animals is vast and changing rapidly, making it a challenge to offer useful generalizations or principles for governing our political relations. Some individual humans or communities might undertake much closer and mutually supporting relations with liminal animals. And it’s quite possible that if we established respectful terms of parallel co-existence on shared territory with liminal animals, some of them, over time, might engage with us in a process of mutual domestication, making the more imbricated relationship of citizenship both possible and desirable. Just as it should be an option for domesticated animal citizens to gradually (and safely) withdraw from co-citizenship with humans, so it should be possible for liminal animals to mutually accommodate and become embedded in closer relations with human societies.

It all comes back to the idea of respect for animals as competent agents who have the right to negotiate their own associations and to live self-determined lives at individual and communal levels. And it comes back to recognition that we are all political animals, making decisions that govern and shape our lives together, even as we constitute different sorts of “we” for political purposes. Sometimes, the shared norms, practices, and interactions of political community form a dense web of interdependence, mutual intelligibility, mutual responsibility, and shared meaning and practice. Democratic citizenship is a principled way of answering the question of how this kind of “we” can make decisions governing their shared society. Sometimes the interconnections between groups are so attenuated and distant that it makes sense to see them as separate political communities pursuing their own forms of society. Diplomacy and treaty relations offer a principled route for addressing issues of joint concern, sharing of territory, mutual assistance, and so on. And sometimes the web of relations falls somewhere in between, either because individuals/groups inevitably transition along various continua, or because differences in fundamental needs and interests mean that some individuals/groups are better suited to relations of respectful (social) distance from one another, even if they share the same land base and must carefully negotiate fair terms of co-existence.

The fundamental challenge of bringing animals into ideas of citizenship long reserved for humans is to recognize that animals don’t form an undifferentiated mass lying outside of human society. The fundamental question for citizenship theory is to understand these dynamics of boundary-drawing and how they relate to different fora and institutions of political decision-making. The fundamental challenge of bringing animals into ideas of citizenship long reserved for humans is to recognize that animals don’t form an undifferentiated mass lying outside of human society. Some animals have always been part of a shared political community with us, even though we have treated them as a debased and exploitable caste. Others have lived in parallel societies apart from human settlement but subject to recurring human invasion, pillage, and colonization. Still others have forged a complicated relationship in the liminal zone, often subject to hatred, disgust, and violence for daring to intrude into the (alleged) human-only space of civilization. We require creative thinking across all of these dimensions to establish new relations with non-human animals on terms of justice.

While the main focus of the Zoopolis model of citizenship is to secure justice in our relations with animals, I would argue that it is also an essential, if incomplete, step toward a more comprehensive ecological ethic that addresses our relationship with all dimensions of the more-than-human world, close or distant, sentient or non-sentient, animate or inanimate. The Zoopolis model focuses in the first instance on what we
owe animals, and so it needs to be supplemented by further thinking about how we relate to plants, soils, rivers, and ecosystems generally. Theories of ecological citizenship that build environmental responsibility into our understanding of good citizenship are important here. But I would emphasize again that, when linking environmental responsibilities with citizenship, we must not blindly reproduce the old human supremacist assumption that only humans are political agents capable of exercising self-rule. Indeed, it is precisely this assumption that explains why our politics is so stubbornly and violently anthropocentric. Many animals are much more vulnerable to ecological change and degradation than humans, and animals are front-line casualties of the ecological crisis. If animals were empowered to shape their relationships with us, we can be sure they would seek more ecologically responsible decisions. In that way, animal citizenship could contribute not only to justice with animals, but also be an important step toward ecological sanity.

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NOTES


2. J. Borrows, Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law (Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2002); L. Simpson, “Looking after Gdoo-naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships,” Wicazo Sa Review 23, no. 2 (2008): 29-42; H. Kiwiretnipeinisik Stark, “Changing the Treaty Question: Remediaging the Rights(s) Relationship,” in J. Borrows and M. Coyle, eds., The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties (Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 248-76. Anishinaabeg traditions of right relations with animals are rich and varied, and I have no expertise or standing to interpret them. I mention them simply to remind political theorists working within the Western tradition that our inherited assumptions are not self-evident or universally shared, and that Indigenous peoples have long theorized and practiced alternative forms of animal politics.


At a minimum, [the resolution of environmental problems] requires a more public philosophy, as the American pragmatist philosophy John Dewey envisioned, though one more focused on making the kind of arguments that resonate with the moral intuitions that most people carry around with them on an everyday basis.

—Andrew Light

A year after his call for a more public environmental philosophy, Andrew Light authored an account of urban ecological citizenship. The account wove together many of the threads of environmental pragmatism; deliberation sensitive to place would start from the assumption of value pluralism and work toward a shared sense of community commitments. Light himself would find support for his hypotheses in his public philosophical work within the city of New York, uncovering the roots of urban ecological citizenship in the activities of community gardeners in the lower East Side. In his “Elegy for a Garden,” Light recounts working alongside neighbors to protect Esperanza Garden from developers sanctioned by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani to bulldoze the site for “dubious low-income housing gains.” Four generations of local residents in the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood rallied around the garden to protect the small patch of green space they had caringly cultivated. To Light, it wasn’t just green space and vegetables that had sprouted in the corner lot, but the seeds of a civic culture.

Since Light’s initial call, researchers have corroborated the philosopher’s hypothesized connections between environmental action and civic engagement. Urban agriculture is so often upheld for its potential for supporting civic engagement that a vibrant discourse has developed under the banner of “civic agriculture.” Scholars of stewardship have likewise noted the connection between environmental work and democratic capacity. Ecological citizenship explicitly informed two 2010 empirical studies, with researchers in Philadelphia and in Athens, Ohio, reporting, respectively, that “participation in... environmental civic associations cultivates... effective citizenship,” and that “gardeners adhere to ecological values and behavior changes willingly based on a sense of virtue toward their communities’ greater good.” More recent scholarship has continued to refine the political theory informing these civic practices, locating clear connections between urban ecological citizenship or civic agriculture and deep democratic theory.

In the spirit of public philosophy, I offer insights from community-engaged research with the urban agriculture community in and around Lansing, Michigan. My hope is to share sentiments from stakeholders who have crafted virtues for being good ecological citizens in a deeply democratic setting. These sentiments point the way to an urban ecological citizenship through which the community and the environment are open to democratic reconstruction and for which identity is a key nutrient in nourishing just and inclusive ecosystems.
Beginning in 2016, my collaborators and I engaged stakeholders to Lansing’s urban agriculture community to prepare for a “Resilience Workshop” that was held in late 2019. Drawing on Light’s theory of urban ecological citizenship as inspiration, we interviewed farmers, community gardeners, and representatives from organizations that support urban growing, asking about their vision for the city’s food system and how they work to bring that vision to fruition. Interviews set the stage for more robust engagement with the communities of refugee farmers that were especially active in the community gardening network, and the efforts built toward the workshop where farmers, gardeners, professionals, and policymakers came together to deliberate over plans and practices that would strengthen the system. What interested me as a philosopher on the team was how these stakeholders conceptualized governance, which is a key ingredient in the achievement of resilience but also a key ingredient in whether we would judge that resilience desirable. In short, how did these individuals participate in the governance of their community, and to what extent did they think of this participation as an exercise of citizenship?

Citizenship [requires] genuine engagement that [generates] mutual and sympathetic understanding. This is the sort of understanding that emerges from “working with” communities rather than offering technocratic solutions.

What we discovered was that there were distinct types of urban agricultural stakeholders, some of whom had a thinner conception of citizenship that required compliance with clear and transparent policies, and some of whom had a thicker conception of citizenship that mandated robust dialogue and the collective articulation of shared norms. Those with the thinner conception operated according to a pretty standard picture of representative democracy; elected officials were entrusted with establishing a safe and environmentally sustainable landscape for consumers to go about their day-to-day lives, provided that the state supported educational initiatives so that producers and consumers could make rational decisions. Certainly, this is a model of citizenship, though I focus here on those with the thicker conception, since their participation is both resonant and dissonant with Light’s model in interesting ways.

The thicker conception of citizenship has developed in urban agricultural communities in a context that has historically struggled to ensure inclusion and promote diversity. These challenges are salient to non-profit organizations working in the field, with an interview participant reporting:

I think the local food movement in general has struggled with the question of how we represent everybody. And I was a part of organizing an event in Lansing around food access, and it’s the same people who show up. It’s the people who are either employed to work in this field or who have some very vocal voice in food. [It] doesn’t necessarily get those who are most affected by food access. Because a lot of those people are lower income, lower resource and don’t have the time to devote to being a part of these conversations.

Another participant shared their efforts to “build coalitions with organizations that represent different needs,” recalling the specific challenges of including new American farmers and eaters who strive to grow food as they did before immigrating here.

Coalition building required the sort of value pluralism that Light shows to be at the core of urban ecological citizenship—good ecological citizens avoided purity tests that would exclude from the coalition those for whom environmental values are lower on their list of priorities. The connection to democratic politics was made explicit by one participant who recognized that their particular environmental values were only some of the many competing values at stake in the city’s urban planning, and that “that’s okay, you know, that’s part of living in a diverse democracy, that not everyone is going to be in your corner.” Another resisted the whole idea of defining core values for urban agriculture, explaining that there are “different priorities and values in terms of what’s seen as most important or most needed by different communities. Might look different in different places.” Though urban agriculture will look different in different places, no one suggested that agricultural practices ought to pollute the environment, and many worked creatively as stewards of important ecological processes—the protection of pollinators, the cycling of nutrients. These values, though, would be made concrete in particular places with particular cultures and landscapes.

Equally impressive was participants’ recognition that citizenship required genuine engagement that generated mutual and sympathetic understanding. This is the sort of understanding that emerges from “working with” communities rather than offering technocratic solutions, and that feminist pragmatist
Instead, many farmers and growers advocated for detailed guidelines for what they should and shouldn’t do, plus audits of existing city codes to anticipate where urban agriculture might conflict with alternative land uses. Equally important would be the visibility that such formal policymaking would lend to their activities, which participants believed would celebrate the contributions that urban agriculture was making to the city. To most at the resilience workshop, part of being a grower is to participate in the democratic place-making that sustained the city in general and its farms and gardens in particular. Quite clearly, working the land had helped to foster a sense of urban ecological citizenship.

**ECOLOGICAL CITIZENSHIP AND IDENTITY POLITICS**

Public philosophy must do more than apply normative theory to real-world contexts; it should be reflexive about its own theories, circling back when recalcitrant experiences problematize one’s starting assumptions. With that in mind, I want to close by attending to an oft-overlooked limb of Light’s account—that urban ecological citizenship offers an alternative to, and is largely incompatible with, identity or special interest politics. Roughly, Light is concerned that the emphasis on standpoint characteristics of identity politics is detrimental to the cultivation of community necessary to ameliorate environmental problems that extend beyond neighborhood boundaries.

Growers generally did share the sense that farmers and gardening required a standpoint that was hard to acquire without developing the subjectivity of someone who works the land, and they firmly believed that sound democratic decision-making sought out this expertise when crafting policies. Given that the quotidian practices of farming generated a particular subjectivity, growers generally expected to have a seat at the table in crafting city plans and ordinances. When criticizing the city’s backyard chicken policy, a community gardener lamented “Did you ask a farmer? Did you ask a person that’s really good with aviaries and knows how many is legit? I don’t think any of that happened. I think it was a couple of people that went, ‘Five chickens. That’s it.’” Frequently, farmers and gardeners riled against ordinances that banned buffer strips and pollinator habitat, which code enforcers saw merely as unmowed and “unsightly” lawns. Those outside of the urban farming community, participants moaned, simply didn’t understand.

There is a resemblance here to what Light calls a “nondemocratic hierarchy of ‘closeness,’” where citizens enter the agora as advocates for special interests that only those with specific

Critical to sympathetic understanding is creating spaces for dialogue and exchange, and a common refrain from urban gardeners was the importance of the garden as a space for learning across difference and building community.

**To most at the resilience workshop, part of being a grower is to participate in the democratic place-making... Quite clearly, working the land had helped to foster a sense of urban ecological citizenship.**

In 2019, the storied Allen Neighborhood Center offered its space for a more intentional deliberation, bringing together farmers, gardeners, and support organizations with city councilpersons and other policymakers. Modeled on the resilience workshops more common in Europe, the deliberation invited participants to co-construct a shared vision for urban agriculture in Lansing and to develop strategies to achieve that vision and ensure its resilience. The conversations echoed a fascinating insight expressed occasionally in the interviews that fed into the planning for the workshop: it is not enough for those involved in the food system to have good will toward one another, and absolutely critical that any informal norms and expectations be codified in city planning documents, ordinances, and legislation. This emphasis marked a contrast between the aforementioned subscribers to the thinner conception of citizenship and the thicker conception of citizenship. To those operating with the thinner conception—who often included city officials themselves—farmers and growers would be best served by the quite vague standards in the state’s Right to Farm Act that mostly exempt agricultural practice from liability. Viewed as run-of-the-mill producers, growers were expected to relish such blanket protections.

**To most at the resilience workshop, part of being a grower is to participate in the democratic place-making... Quite clearly, working the land had helped to foster a sense of urban ecological citizenship.**
experiences are expected to appreciate. On closer inspection, however, growers appeared adroit at reconciling their personal values with those of the fuller community. When asked how their values have changed as a result of working in urban agriculture, several participants chronicled the transition from sustainability zealot to urban ecological citizen. Initially drawn to food systems work by concern for the environment, many learned to balance environmental values against other social values held by their communities.

Resilience workshops are ordinarily conceived as opportunities to build community capacity to adapt and transform, but they should also be embraced as much-needed spaces to be and become better ecological citizens.

Moderating their own special interests did not amount to abandoning those interests when they came into conflict with others’ interests. Instead, environmental values were pursued in context-sensitive ways that considered the values of other neighborhood residents. This entailed a spirit of experimentalism where farmers and gardeners were always seeking out opportunities to learn more. Reflecting on a fault line between urban farmers and policymakers, one grower called for “more actual research”:

A lot of these [new food safety policies] are really common sense, and people actually should not be applying unsafe water to leafy greens that are going to be eaten fresh.... But does it really need to be 120 days between when we get lay manure on the ground outside in a biologically active place?

A newer garden leader prided her community garden for its appetite for new knowledge, noting that “we have a handful of fairly knowledgeable gardeners, but we don’t have anyone really expert. So we all have a hungering desire to learn more.” Note that this experimentalism is not constrained to an investigation of “the facts”—what really emerged in conversation was the openness to experimenting with different values, with different ways of enacting various visions and learning to make them compatible. This may be the most salient expression of ecological citizenship, which understood democracy as a dramatic rehearsal of diverse perspectives striving for cohabitation of mutual flourishing.18

Where participants were more likely to grant a privileged position was with regard to matters of food access and insecurity. As the passages earlier indicate, the predominantly white urban agricultural community did look to non-white voices to think through the structural barriers to procuring healthy and affordable food. Yet this recognition is perfectly consistent with their own democratic ideals—that decisions ought to be made with the best knowledge at hand, and that those whose subjectivities are shaped by enduring structural injustices have both the standpoints and experiences to lead in those decisions. Even those who did maintain a close connection to the natural world appreciated the need to build diverse coalitions in order to enact the policy changes that would support urban agriculture in the city. This required delegating decisions to different scales of governance—an idea that resilience scholars would recognize as polycentric governance.19 This would allow neighborhoods to develop local food systems that responded to the particular problems they faced, all while working within more flexible guidelines that coordinated the regional food system. It also required farmers and gardeners to be citizens of multiple and nested governments, cultivating norms for their gardens or neighborhoods while also negotiating statutes with city officials and state representatives. Resilience workshops are ordinarily conceived as opportunities to build community capacity to adapt and transform, but they should also be embraced as much-needed spaces to be and become better ecological citizens.

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NOTES


10. Ibid.


It’s hard to pin down when exactly it happened, but at some point in the last several decades, we in the United States stopped calling ourselves, in the collective, citizens. These days, we may say we’re voters, with the angry partisan edge that it carries; or, when we’re feeling beleaguered, taxpayers, who grudgingly fork over our hard-earned pennies. Most commonly, however, we identify as consumers, as if our primary purpose—even assigned duty—were to gobble up everything in sight. Although the coronavirus has temporarily quelled the voraciousness of our capitalistic appetites, the prevailing view is that this will and must be reversed when things get back to normal.

For most of American history—at least through the end of World War II—excess consumption was considered a vice, a sign of poor upbringing, and a moral failing, while frugality was a patriotic virtue. By the time of the terrorist attacks of 2001, however, the president told Americans that the best way to show national unity was to go out and shop. And today, with laissez-faire economics close to becoming a sacred belief system, consumer spending is considered the most important measure of the nation’s health. As a girl, I read Victorian novels in which young protagonists died tragically of “consumption”—an old term for tuberculosis—not quite understanding what that was at the time. I think it’s not too great a stretch to say that now we are all dying from consumption in a society in which everything is transactional, and the only widely shared value is unchecked consumerism. This highly contagious, chronic affliction causes inexorable environmental degradation and social corrosion. But recovery may still be possible. Reclaiming—and enlarging—our identities as citizens may be a way to start.

Unlike consumer, which suggests the primacy of individual demands and the one-way flow of goods into a feeding trough, Democratic citizen implies rights and responsibilities, reciprocity, restraint, finding ways to live peaceably amidst others over time, enabling different collectives to gather in struggle and debate. If human societies are presently failing to embrace these habits, we might relearn them by looking to our repeatedly ignored but inalienable status as Earth citizens. Being an Earthling entails compulsory participation in the give and take of global biogeochemical cycles—of water, carbon, oxygen, phosphorous, nitrogen, and other essential, collectively shared commodities. Although we don’t like to think of ourselves as merely physical beings, we, like all other organisms, are literally built from the raw materials of Earth—rainwater, soil minerals, and atmospheric carbon captured by plants. Older cultures understood this; the word human shares the same ancient Indo-European root as humus, meaning of the soil or earth.

Over geologic time, biogeochemical cycles evolve to be exquisitely calibrated and elegantly choreographed, with all
participants moving in stately synchrony. Every geologic process has an inverse operation; every flow a compensatory counterflow, in an intricate system of checks and balances. Volcanoes exhale, photosynthesizers inhale. Precipitation is balanced by evaporation; oxidation by reduction; growth by decay; uplift by erosion. It’s like an elaborate contradance happening across many different scales in time and space, in which after many rounds, everybody ends up back where they started.

In fact, this capacity for infinite repetition and reincarnation is the single most important attribute that distinguishes Earth from its sister planets. It’s not simply that Earth happened to be the right size and distance from the Sun, but that it developed self-governance practices as a young planet that have kept its surface environment clement for most of the past 4 billion years. Where better to look for guidance about what makes complex systems stable over the long term?

Unfortunately, even though we are natives, most modern humans have never been taught the most basic lessons in Earth civics. Few of us are aware of the planet’s powerful “deep state”—the biogeochemical civil servants that keep the natural infrastructure in good repair. Instead, we have stormed into these ancient institutions with no understanding of the rules of decorum, depleting aquifers, degrading soils, accelerating nutrient runoff, out-stripping volcanoes as greenhouse gas spewers by a hundred-fold. Among our fellow members of the biosphere, we are scofflaws, anarchists, kleptocrats—hardly model citizens.

**Capacity for infinite repetition and reincarnation is the single most important attribute that distinguishes Earth from its sister planets.**

Besides our general ignorance of the Earth’s governing principles, another reason we fall short as planetary citizens is that the boundaries defining our dual natural and political citizenships do not align. Natural precincts—watersheds, biomes, climate zones, geologic terrains—overlap and intersect in complex ways, and often awkwardly, with cities, counties, states, and nations. Looking down from the window of an airplane, one sees the collision between the straight lines and grids that humans impose on the landscape and the fractal, unruly geometry of natural systems. This is more than merely aesthetic discord; it creates fundamental jurisdictional conflicts that make it hard to be a good citizen of any type.

A notorious example of this mismatch that serves as a modern environmental fable is the long-running Waukesha, Wisconsin, water controversy. Waukesha, currently an affluent suburb of Milwaukee, was once famous for its artesian springs, which emanated from a deep sandstone aquifer so oversaturated that water squirted up to the surface in natural fountains. But after decades of extracting groundwater for homes and businesses at rates far exceeding its rate of natural replenishment (and in spite of predictions as far back as 1960 that this would lead to an eventual crisis), Waukesha’s municipal wells began to run dry in the early 2000s.

The city of Waukesha lies less than twenty miles west of Lake Michigan, which holds about 5 percent of the Earth’s fresh surface water. It would seem quite natural for the city to switch from groundwater to lake water for its municipal supply. Through a happenstance of glacial geomorphology, however, Waukesha is outside the drainage basin of the Lake—and inter-basinal water transfer is generally considered an environmental taboo, akin to appropriating someone else’s savings to pay your own bills. Moreover, moving Lake Michigan water across the basin boundary would be at odds with the Great Lakes Compact, an accord among the Canadian provinces and American states within the Great Lakes watershed that was ratified by the U.S. Congress in 2008. The Compact specifies that there should be no further construction of pipelines or canals for transfer of water outside the Great Lakes Basin (certain existing diversions were grandfathered in out of political necessity). Approving an exception for Waukesha could have set a dangerous precedent, potentially allowing water-starved desert states to one day tap the Great Lakes.

After almost a decade of negotiation and legal wrangling, all signatories to the Compact have agreed to an elaborate work-around for Waukesha, based on the argument that its county lies partly within the Lake Michigan watershed. The city will be able to “borrow” Lake Michigan water—that is, withdraw it from the lake, then treat and return it. For now, the Great Lakes Compact seems intact, but many fear this is only an early skirmish in a conflict that will escalate as climate change makes Great Lakes water a more and more valuable asset. And some legal scholars worry that if the Compact were ever to be challenged in a federal court, it might be struck down because it could be construed as violating constitutional prohibitions on barriers to the flow of commodities across state lines. Such a case would put the legal standing of political and natural geographies, and American vs. Earth citizenship, in dangerous opposition. Eventually everyone loses if our legal system violates natural laws because in the end natural laws always
prevail, and the penalties for violating them—empty aquifers, anoxic oceans, runaway climate change—are severe and non-negotiable.

When the pace of life slows and the radius of one’s world shrinks, powers of observation become more acute and priorities become reordered.

Just as natural and human map boundaries are often incongruent, there is a similar, and equally perilous, discrepancy in the timescales of geological and political governance. Ecosystems, aquifers, soils, and landscapes operate on schedules far longer than biennial budgets and campaign cycles. Overdrawn groundwater, exhausted soils, and clear-cut forests will eventually recover, but only if they are protected for decades from further degradation. And natural systems have inertia: once environmental changes are set in motion, they cannot simply be legislated to stop. The myopic, short-term viewworlds of office-holders are, increasingly, on a collision course with the long-term well-being of those they represent.

As dual citizens of nature and the nation, we need to start casting our votes in ways that nurture both. What will it take to become better citizens of our townships and watersheds, states and ecoregions, nations and continents, over timescales of decades and longer?

Perhaps this anxious and uncertain time of the coronavirus pandemic, when our political and economic infrastructure has been revealed to be far more fragile than we ever imagined, could be an opportunity for a radical reconception of what citizenship means. The coronavirus certainly underscores the idea that our political boundaries are artificial constructs, blithely ignored by microbial armies. It reminds us that no matter what nation we dwell in, we all share the same constitution—our common, fallible human form. The tiny viral villain has also performed an astonishing feat: stopping the mighty force of capitalism in its tracks, pulling aside the curtain and exposing the great and powerful laissez-faire system as less prepared for crisis than a subsistence economy. And it has thrown an unforgiving spotlight on the virtual economic apartheid in this country.

At the same time, the pandemic has demonstrated that we do have the collective capacity to take action for the common good when we are given clear information about the risks of inaction. And it has taught us that we can, at least temporarily, do without many things that we considered essential just days before the severity of the epidemic became an undeniable reality. The dramatic reductions in travel and manufacturing during the coronavirus crisis will provide valuable, well-calibrated data about how we can reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the future. Families who become accustomed to quiet city streets, where singing birds and children at play are the loudest sounds, might resist allowing cars to take control again. When the pace of life slows and the radius of one’s world shrinks, powers of observation become more acute and priorities become reordered. One notices and feels grateful for things that were barely sensed as we were all self-importantly hurtling along; a friendly wave from a neighbor; the everyday miracle of good health; the incremental unfolding of spring, as scheduled, when everything else is on hold.

I am optimistic that we will be changed for the better by this abrupt suspension of old practices. While the pandemic has exacted a terrible global toll, it does at least offer an unexpected opportunity to realign our values and reclaim our identities as humans and, more broadly, as Earth citizens. We can set to work on repairing the frayed social and ecological webs that will provide stability and resilience in future times of crisis. We may discover that the same attributes that foster robust ecosystems—diversity, mutual dependency, intergenerational continuity—also build healthy human communities. Enhancing our sense of natural citizenship may help stem toxic nationalism by reminding us that we are part of something more important and more enduring than this particular bitterly partisan moment. We may then develop the habit of seeing ourselves as citizens in time—future ancestors, with the responsibility to leave the places we inhabit in good working order.

All of this will liberate us from the corporate encoding that narrows our focus toward our own selfish appetites and reduces our civic role to mere consumption. By refusing such diminishment, we can reclaim our democratic citizenship and envision a deeper, more expansive version of it, in which patriotism and environmentalism, flag-waving and tree-hugging, red, white, blue, and green align for the common good—citizens restored and reunited.

Staring squarely in the face of contemporary and continuous planetary climate crisis, the questions of how to intervene and act differently, both interpersonally and ecologically, are more pressing than ever. One increasingly popular move is reframing or recontextualizing humans’ relationship to Earth and our place within our planetary ecosystem. In attempts to recuperate or return to a less harmful framework for human–nature relationships, some have tried to give familiar human concepts a less anthropocentric interpretation. One such concept is citizenship, which some try to redefine in a more ecocentric fashion by the designation “ecological citizenship.” There are two different implications attached to this move. It can mean building a stronger obligation of care and respect toward non-human beings into the duties of human citizenship. Alternatively, but perhaps with the same ends in view, it can mean legally and constitutionally incorporating the independent rights and interests of natural beings and systems into the more-than-human political and moral community by broadening the status of citizen to include them.

However, like most human interventions, this turn is not without its challenges and dangers. To begin, the predominant understanding of the concept of citizenship in the modern period—liberal nationalist citizenship—is not only anthropocentric morally, it is highly individualistic ontologically, and thus, it is a fraught concept. In this essay, I will provide a select genealogy of the modern liberal notion of citizenship and the way citizenship has been used, with mixed results, in attempts to expand consideration of who belongs, especially ecologically. This history informs my position that notions of ecological citizenship, while perhaps well-intentioned, are ill-advised.

As a settler nation, the United States was birthed from Indigenous genocide, dispossession, and enslavement.

The prominent Euro-Western notion of citizen/citizenship emerges alongside the notion of the nation or the nation state. Both the concepts of citizen and nation state are modern political inventions identifying a geographical territory bounded by political borders and tied to international recognition. While surely humans have always belonged to particular communities, the liberal nation state that is used to define most of the places we refer to as “nations” or dominant geopolitical powers on a global scale are chronologically recent signifiers and designations. National borders have changed drastically over time, especially following World War II, meaning that most of the nations we refer to by name were established in
the post-colonial and settler colonial world. Therefore, terms and concepts such as nation-state, citizen, and citizenship and their attendant meanings are not eternal, natural, or unwavering categories or descriptors, as they are sometimes assumed to be. Nevertheless, these terms have had and continue to hold incredible normative force and power, and they shape and inform the lives of those (both human and more-than-human) who find themselves inside or outside of their embrace.

Benedict Anderson has described the nation and ideas of citizenship as “an imagined community.” This imagined community of the nation is an important historical development that in many ways became more pronounced and apparent during and after the Industrial Revolution, which transformed modes and systems of life on Earth. This new social identity superseded and often replaced more local or regional identities that previously held sway, much of which had to do with the new technological advances of industrialization that put nations and nation-states in capitalist economic relations of comparison and competition. Carole McCann and Seung-kyung Kim describe this curious notion of imagined community in the following way:

Most citizens will never know or even meet most of their compatriots, but national myths, holidays, and patriotic rituals, such as commemorations on Independence Day, bind citizens to one another in their imaginations. These beliefs and rituals hold the nation together and tie it to territory.

Nation and citizenship are thus powerful tools and categories for feelings of belonging and disbelonging. Yet the entities we refer to as nations and nation-states, especially in a Western context, are not free from troubling historical and ongoing injustices.

While the concept of citizenship may signal virtue and positivity for some, I still sit in the woundedness of what citizenship as assimilation or as second-class members of societies has meant for both my people and others.

One of the ways that ecological citizenship has been evoked in the history of Euro-Western environmental ethics is through the work of Aldo Leopold. Leopold argued that we must expand our notions of both community and ethics to include the land, which he understood as comprised of soils, waters, plants, and animals. He further argued that humans need to abandon their roles as conquerors of the land or biotic community and embrace their status as ordinary members or citizens of it. Clearly, Leopold has in mind here that citizenship ideally involves moral consideration for other citizen-members.

It is interesting that Leopold uses the term citizen in his vision of enacting a land ethic. He likely uses this designation in an attempt to motivate people to change their perception of nature as inferior by enfolding the land and ecological beings into the welcoming and homey category of citizen. However, I think this strategy also does something else: it holds injustice far away both temporally and spatially, which dangerously props up citizenship and citizens as positive and unproblematic categories and identities. However, citizen is not an unequivocally positive or unproblematic category.

In the context of the formation of the settler nation of the United States, citizenship was far from universal or inclusive. The founding fathers penned the Declaration of Independence with many among them slave holders and all of them occupants of stolen land. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was in practice reserved for white, landholding men even as the Declaration declared that “all men are created equal.” These contradictions that defy the logic of universal enlightenment are not one-offs or rare in the history of Western domination of the planet. So it is curious that ecological thinkers should so emphatically and unironically embrace and promote ecological citizenship as the salve for what ails us as a global planetary community.

In theorizing the creation and contradictions of the European and Euro-American nation-states, Edward Said argued that the imagined community of European and American nations was built upon an “imaginary geography” he called “Orientalism” that supported and attempted to justify the West’s alleged superiority over the rest of the world. We can see this imagined community and geography operating in Leopold’s choice to include Ancient Greece as a notable example of both human error and human redemption. It is interesting that Ancient Greece, considered the cradle of a Western humanistic tradition, should be chosen as an example of the human potential to expand ethics further but is not connected to similar ethical violations found in the United States. Perhaps Leopold didn’t want to get bogged down in the United States’ history of slavery and its legacies that divided and almost destroyed the settler nation; however, that represents a choice steeped in a particular form of privilege. Descendants of enslaved Africans, like
myself, do not have the privilege of avoiding or leaving out that history, which has afterlives we as Black peoples continue to suffer from.

There may be those who would caution that this is merely a single example or make a claim that the goal of moral inclusion justifies the choice of words: surely “citizenship” isn’t all that bad if it’s doing work toward improving ecosystems and the health of the planet. A closer examination, however, reveals that this example is not isolated but is embedded within a larger social context in the United States. As a settler nation, the United States was birthed from Indigenous genocide, dispossession, and enslavement. Citizenship and sovereignty of Indigenous and African people were completely disregarded and in fact erased for the purposes of building a different imagined community, one in which Indigenous and Black peoples were not even included in the category of human. Additionally, in the United States, many African Americans and Native Americans were arbitrarily classified as citizens without their consent in order to dissolve their group rights and assimilate them into the settler nation. These global campaigns of violence we now call colonialism and imperialism were about domination of both lands and particular bodies for the purposes of creating nations, communities, and geographies. These campaigns relied upon intensive, violent practices that destroyed, degraded, and murdered ecosystems, peoples, and the symbiotic, reciprocal relations between them. We can see this imagined community and geography alive and well today with the Trump administration’s manufactured hysteria about immigration from “undesirable” parts of the world as well assaults on the United States’ policy of birthright citizenship.

In fact, the notion of citizenship within the United States’ conservation movement—a movement that has been exported and propagated around the planet—has been a foundational tool in dispossessing and terraforming landscapes, with colossally negative consequences. Take, for instance, the Yosemite Model of conservation responsible for the dispossession of what is now Yosemite National Park from Miwok, Yokut, Paiute, and Ahwahneechee peoples. The concept of citizenship was a tool used to justify this dispossession and is still being replicated in other countries. For example, in 1929, Yosemite Park Superintendent Charles Thompson met with Miwok leaders and said that Miwok residence in the park “was a privilege and a not a right,” which was deeply motivated by understandings of national belonging/disbelonging propped up by racist notions of settler citizenship. Mark Dowie quotes Thompson’s views of Indians as “less than desirable citizens [who] should have long since been banished from the park.” Citizenship and citizen status as it was deployed in the U.S. conservation movement was not and is not a neutral, apolitical, or generally benevolent force. Racist and hierarchal understandings of citizenship mapped onto Eurocentric notions of civility and civilization were used to create a New World order in the image of Euro-Western domination and colonial rule.

Not long after this, to return to A Sand County Almanac, Leopold wrote that “a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.” This line of argumentation, however, neglects that land ethics that center humans or disperses human membership within the larger biotic community is—and has been for some time—an essential feature of Indigenous philosophies and worldviews.

A Leopoldian notion of the land ethic is only chronologically novel in the sense that it is speaking from a particular tradition of knowledge and ideas that has for centuries disparaged, ignored, and even erased Indigenous philosophies, ways of knowing, and perspectives within both the North American and broader global context. Many ecological thinkers and writers have been inspired and heartened by a Leopoldian land ethic because it does express something so wonderfully different from the commodification and disrespect of lands and ecosystems. I do not contest this or think this is necessarily a bad thing, but as a Black environmental thinker I do think that the way Leopold is centered in white Western environmental discourse obscures other beautiful and rich land ethics of the Western world and the Americas. This is not just a Leopold problem, but rather a larger representational problem within the narrative of mainstream environmentalism.

This, again, is not a singular event or exception to the rule, but rather a developed and entrenched practice of Western environmental thinking. Take for example the so-called godfather of conservation and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, who proclaimed that the Sierra region of California was pristine, untouched nature:

In his writings Muir insisted that Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove had, before the arrival of Euro-American settlers, been unoccupied virgin wilderness. He claimed that any Indians on these lands were temporary nomads passing through. Nothing could be further from the truth. For thousands of years, before Savage and Bunnell “discovered” the valley, Indians cultivated it with seeds and bulbs to grow legumes, greens, flowers, and medicinal plants. They pruned the valley’s trees and shrubs and
weeded the meadows. And they periodically burned off the entire valley to recycle nutrients and clear the floor of unwanted brush.  

Clearly Indigenous peoples had for generations and even millennia cultivated a sustainable, responsive, and what might be deemed a democratic relationship with the land. However, this relationship was overlooked and erased by dominant founders and members of the Euro-American settler conservation movement. It is brutally ironic, then, that a call for democratic ecological citizenship should then be introduced by a Euro-American like Leopold in the context of North America as both a novel and necessary ethical progression for environmental regard. When I first read “The Land Ethic,” I had a funny feeling of déjà vu because I had for some time studied the beautiful eco-philosophies built on reciprocity and respect for the agency of the natural world espoused by Afro-diasporic peoples and Indigenous peoples. These eco-philosophies and environmental ethics have been cultivated and passed on for generations by peoples who are rarely mentioned and are, in fact, often targeted and attacked for their ways of knowing and being.

While the concept of citizenship may signal virtue and positivity for some, I still sit in the woundedness of what citizenship as assimilation or as second-class members of societies has meant for both my people and others, such as Indigenous peoples. Leopold’s “plain member and citizen” rhetoric implies an understanding of citizenship in which the status of citizen is open, accessible, positive, and politically unproblematic—which is an understanding informed by a particular kind of privilege and imagined audience, even if it is meant to do ethical work for the environment. Many other movements on behalf of the environment have had noble goals and ideals as well, but that does not mean we can neglect their imperfect and often oppressive execution or means. For example, the global conservation movement, the wilderness movement, and the federal government of the United States have used citizenship as a club to dispossess and restrict the freedoms and liberties of people of color, including Indigenous people, up to and beyond the time Leopold was writing.

We need to think critically and thoroughly about the current deployment of ecological citizenship by Western environmental scholars, ecologists, and advocates as the “new” salve and ethic that will undo our previous attitudes and sins against nature. The emergence of this concept needs to be held in the context of radical truth-telling that both centers and owns the ways that this solution is not the West’s property or provenance. This repurposing of citizenship for ecological ends needs to own the dark and brutal histories and continuous realities of how citizenship has been wielded as a dangerous and often deadly weapon against communities of color and Indigenous peoples globally.

Speaking of the ways that Indigenous eco-philosophies and relations to place have been disparaged time and again by Western ideologies, Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete writes: “The importance Native Americans traditionally place on ‘connecting’ with their place is not a romantic notion that is out of step with the times. Instead, it is the quintessential ecological mandate of our time.” This disparagement of Native American environmental ethics and philosophies as pre-modern, anti-modern, or romantic was also a weapon used to dispossess Indigenous peoples and inscribe settler philosophies and models of land-use management in their place. Now that we are reaping the consequences of those land-use management systems, it may be critical to turn to the wisdom of Indigenous peoples and their land philosophies, but we need to acknowledge and honor this wisdom. This is a wisdom that thrives and survives in spite of and in resistance to incredible obstacles, such as settler colonialism, ecological violence, and the madness/power of extreme extractivism supported by billion-dollar transnational corporations allied with nation-state governments.

None of what I’ve written is intended to disparage establishing a better, more equitable relationship with nature. However, I do think that this transition to a better relationship must be honest and must be just. We in the West must acknowledge the sordid history of citizenship, including its implications for the kinds of environmental degradation we inherited and also participate in every day. We must tell the full stories of how we got to this place, whom we’ve harmed as a result of that, and whose ancestral and current wisdom and philosophies we are indebted to. In this movement toward forging a more just environmental ethic for our planetary community, we must follow the
lead of Indigenous peoples and other peoples who have been dispossessed and dislocated from their relatives, both human and more-than-human.

One alternative to reconceptualizing our collective relationship to the more-than-human world comes from an attention to Indigenous philosophies that are grounded in a cosmopolitanism of interrelation and interdependence. To speak to one particular tradition of viewing land and environment as relations or relatives, I will focus on Nishnaabeg or Anishinaabe philosophies.

Before doing so, I would like to position myself and how it is I find myself on Turtle Island, or what is currently referred to as North America. I am a multi-ethnic Black woman who is descended both from enslaved Africans and European settlers in the United States. I studied and earned my Ph.D. in Anishinaabewaki on the Anishinaabe lands currently referred to as Michigan and was mentored by my teacher and friend Dr. Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi). I say this to orient myself, to speak to the lineage of my existence, but also to acknowledge my interdependence and reliance on Anishinaabe lands, peoples, cultures, and philosophies. They are and remain an integral part of me that guides the kind of scholarship I do and the kind of person, relative, descendant, and eventually ancestor I strive to become.

While the particular neoliberal, multicultural view of citizenship, which I critiqued earlier, is present within this land and this time, many alternatives exist. Many of these alternatives, such as Anishinaabe philosophies of interdependence and interrelations, have been targeted and silenced through settler colonialism and imperialism so that the neoliberal concept of citizenship as assimilation to settler culture could take center stage. It has made these Indigenous philosophies harder to see and experience, but that has not and does not erase them. Anishinaabe concepts of mutual consensual cooperation come from a simple and profound awareness of the ways in which all beings are related, which is based on a multi-generational (sometimes millennia-long) attention to the processes of ecosystems and the more-than-human world, which I have written about elsewhere.15 In place of hierarchy and domination, Anishinaabe philosophies (and many other Indigenous and Afro-diasporic philosophies not mentioned here) center webs and layers of mutual gifts and responsibilities. This requires not labeling something as “citizen,” “member,” or “human” to confer respect or belonging, but rather an orientation toward all beings’ agency, difference, and importance as a relative or relation within our larger web of relations.

An example would be the way Anishinaahe (and many other Indigenous and Afro-diasporic) worldviews understand water. Water is alive. Water is a being that always carries responsibilities and gifts. We, as living beings, are literally composed mostly of water and rely on the various and multiple responsibilities water has to survive and flourish. This is why obstacles or interruptions to water’s responsibilities, such as threats of contamination and pollution from oil and gas pipelines, are so dire and opposed so strongly. Water is a relative. Water is kin. Water needs water protectors to help fulfill water’s responsibilities when water is threatened. It is hard to even express this in English, something which ecologist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about extensively.16 Though it may be hard for us as English-speakers to envision or understand, it is not impossible.

So much of the hope I see in people who want to relate to the environment differently comes precisely from an acknowledgment that we can teach ourselves—or rather unteach ourselves—how to think and be otherwise. This, for me, cannot come from an imposition of dominant concepts, such as citizen, onto other beings in hopes of assimilating them to our sameness or us-ness, but rather from a serious and lifelong commitment to honoring and studying the living and growing traditions of Indigenous and Afro-diasporic peoples, as I’ve argued for before and will continue to argue for.17 This also requires bearing witness and responsibility to the systems we are all complicit in that have imposed truly incredible obstacles to the growth and survival of these knowledge systems. We are all related and what that means most concretely is that we are all responsible to and for others—not in a paternalistic or domineering way but in a way that respects deeply the agency and consent of all others, who always have their own gifts and responsibilities as well.

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NOTES


8. I use this term in the same way it is employed by Dowie in Conservation Refugees on p. 13.


14. G. Cajete, Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light, 2016), 211.


17. Murdock, “Unsettling Reconciliation.”
The last token to catch  
the only bus that will  
get you there on time  
for your paycheck to see  
you through two more weeks  
amassing tokens just for change.  

“It’s bigger than this. I spoke too soon.”

Coretta says to Martin, “Get up!  
Rosa’s left a seat right next to her,” and  
Demurely she’s waiting rubbing red dust  
from reading glasses while the Southern bus  
driver spits shears through the rear view  
imagining bleeding brown moles on her face.  

“It’s bigger than this. I spoke too soon.”

Garvey tells Harriet to tell Sojourner  
that she’s a woman too cause  
he was marveling at how easy  
it is to cross moving waters not knowing  
how deep but trusting that if you rejoin  
your pupils to the northern stars callused  
souls over cracked feet find substance underneath.  

“It’s bigger than this. I spoke too soon.”

Crispus Attucks in James’ town, twenty  
Africans as Dutch as a slave’s a ship,  
Nat Turner burns fire in a Virginia cave,  
Harriet’s narcoleptic vision makes water moccasins  
meek, Sally sails a master’s mission to Paris,
and Chapman-Catt tells Frederick Douglass
“only for those who qualify.”

“It’s bigger than this. I spoke too soon.”

Lincoln’s thinking drinking while wanting Confederate cash,
Emmett Till’s swinging to Count Basie in a Holiday hash,
Fannie Lou Hamer has lost her eye holding it in the right
hand, Carver eats in the bachelor’s basement, dorms in a closet,
takes notes outside through a slightly opened pained
stained class glass window, and Booker T. will have
him crossing corn for the Christ in us all.

“It’s bigger than this. I spoke too soon.”

Monday morning finds you trying your tokens for
change, James Meredith saves you a seat and a crazy
man’s up front telling driver Barnett that he wants
off at the next stop, and you show your tokens for
change, various diplomas in tow, and the driver takes
your tokens but offers no change, and the crazy man
pulls out his, asks for Alex Haley and hurriedly
says as he strides off the bus toward the Audubon Ballroom,

“It’s bigger than this. I’ve spoken too soon.
I’ve been with you. I’ve trained you,
and I know what you can do.”

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Education Series), was published in 2019.
In July 1549, Robert Kett, a relatively well-off English gentleman farmer, led a march of nearly sixteen thousand people from the small market town of Wymondham, Norfolk, to the city of Norwich to resist the practice of land enclosure. Enclosure, forwarded by England’s nobility and wealthy landowners, was the process of fencing in public grazing areas—known as the commons—in order to increase one’s own private landholdings and income. It was condemned over several centuries as a thinly veiled form of theft, but its use grew, nevertheless. Robert Kett’s resistance wasn’t the first that sought to combat enclosure, but it came at a time when the practice was increasing, and it led to a full-blown rebellion, sparking like-minded revolts all across the region of East Anglia. The rebellion was eventually suppressed in bloody battles headed by the Earl of Warwick. Kett himself was tried for treason, hung from the walls of Norwich Castle, and allowed to die slowly of starvation.

On the walls of Norwich Castle there is a plaque dedicated to the memory of Robert Kett. It reads:

In 1549 AD Robert Kett yeomen farmer of Wymondham was executed by hanging in this castle after the defeat of the Norfolk Rebellion of which he was the leader. In 1949 AD—four hundred years later—this memorial was placed here by the citizens of Norwich in reparation and honour to a notable and courageous leader in the long struggle of the common people of England to escape from a servile life into the freedom of just conditions. [Emphasis added.]

Kett was not just fighting for an abstract idea of freedom—if such a thing as freedom separated from the physical realities of life even exists. The first freedom of any living creature, including humans, is to do just that: live. Democratic citizenship has been extended over the centuries to include broader human and social rights, but it started with an early form of ecology, with the land and access to sustainable livelihoods. What Kett was fighting for was people’s basic right of survival.

The impact of losing the commons can be difficult for the modern mind to imagine. Where once people in England and mainland Europe could support themselves and their families from nearby lands through carefully managed shared use, with enclosure those lands were snatched away, fenced off, and reserved for the already wealthy few. Commons made it “possible to live without oppression or exploitation,” says Peter Linebaugh, historian and professor emeritus at the University of Toledo and author of two books on the Magna Carta and the accompanying Charter of the Forest (an agreement that King Henry III’s nobles forced him to sign in 1217, two years after
The loss of the commons, Linebaugh says, was the origin of “jobs”—requiring people to work for someone else’s profit in order to survive. With enclosure, common people were forced into servitude or tenancy, forever afterwards dependent on a “superior” for employment or a lease on farmable soil. The land and its bounty became divorced from their labor and even a subsistence means of survival. We live with the legacy of this injustice today, though most of us have forgotten its origins.

Riots and violent rebellions entangled Great Britain from the 1400s through the end of the 1800s, many of them related in some way to the enclosure of the commons. These actions were the birthplace of democratic citizenship—it was in the struggle over access to the resources held in royal forests and in fights against enclosures that human and democratic rights were painstakingly defined and refined in England and afterwards, in America. The 1217 Forest Charter in particular, which laid out in detail common people’s rights of subsistence, became a foundation for hammering out human and social rights over several centuries. It’s been called a “classic environmental statute,” linking rights of subsistence to a judicial system, the forest courts, that enforced those rights and considered grievances. In the context of this ever-evolving environment-focused legal system, Robert Kett and his followers sought justice against those who enclosed common lands. People had a right to live, the Forest Charter acknowledged, and to do so they needed access to resources. It was a surprisingly adaptable and robust legal framework, but it wasn’t always enough. When rights were denied, or if the judicial system failed, riot or rebellion became people’s only recourse.

With enclosure, common people were forced into servitude or tenancy... The land and its bounty became divorced from their labor... We live with the legacy of this injustice today, though most of us have forgotten its origins.

Enclosure rebellions and the Forest Charter have faded from memory, in England as well as in America. Those of us who live in these countries have largely forgotten that the freedoms we enjoy and fight to protect, like freedom of speech and movement, grew from the struggle over rights of subsistence. In many ways, those less tangible rights are tied to the actual land we each live upon. Only now, when the fate of the entire planet is at stake, is democratic citizenship returning to its ecological roots.

Today, instead of simply sacrificing common grazing lands, theft of the commons seeps into every cell of human existence: the right to pollute, to extract, to harvest, to freely pursue profit, while leaving a wake of waste in its various forms, is stealing the commons not just from humanity but from the vast ecological entanglements we live among and depend upon. Only now are we remembering that, in order to advocate for higher forms of freedom, humans must first be able to live. We need clean water, breathable air, arable soil, and a habitable planet. All these things are now at risk, both locally and globally. The impact of enclosure might have been more immediately obvious in the fences and hedgerows associated with it, but the modern effects of valuing private profit over the common good are only an iteration of enclosure on a far grander scale. Before they can combat these forces, ecological citizens must look at the deeper histories of humans’ relationship to nature and legal rights of use and ask themselves: Are our systems of justice robust enough to uphold our rights to life and health, or are we going find ourselves in Kett’s situation, forced to rebel in order to survive?

A multitude of injustices stem from the reality that too few people control the resources that every single human requires for survival—in particular, land and water. This stark fact once prompted an otherwise law-abiding yeoman farmer to rebel, and today it leaves many feeling that, as citizens, they have no other recourse than to engage in acts their governments consider illegal, or at a minimum, dangerous. Wet’suwet’en citizens blockading Canadian railways in protest against a natural gas pipeline being built across their territory, Standing Rock Sioux citizens who set up a peaceful protest camp to protect their only source of clean water from an oil pipeline, and people like Greta Thunberg and her fellow School Strike for Climate citizens who seek action on climate change—all of these activists, and many more worldwide, are following in Robert Kett’s footsteps. When multi-billion-dollar corporations profit at the expense of the clean water and land essential to all life, or burn away a habitable planet for our children, and our systems of law and justice do nothing to stop it, then the freedoms we treasure, whether of thought or speech or religion or voting, become at the same time both secondary and essential. Our first freedom, to live, comes from the land that supports all life, but throughout civilized history we’ve had to wrest that right from the grip of the powerful through other means.
In his 1879 book *Progress & Poverty*, economist Henry George addressed directly the role of land and resource hoarding in political and social unrest. “It is not enough that men should vote,” he wrote, “it is not enough that they should be theoretically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life.” He wrote that to neglect the cause of “the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth” would inevitably lead to social unrest. It was private ownership of land, he maintained, that created massive inequalities in wealth and conditions ripe for resistance and rebellion.³

**But if we do come to discard the servile life in favor of just conditions for all, it will be because those same common people took a stand against injustices of all kinds and in as many ways as possible. Ecological citizenship isn’t something we need to invent anew. It’s always been there. We just have to rediscover the capacity for it within ourselves.**

Nearly a hundred and fifty years later, the conditions that George labored to unravel and change maintain their hold on Western societies, exacerbated by intractable problems like nuclear waste, leaking oil pipelines, the climate crisis, and mass extinctions. Private profit and socialized waste continue to draw directly from the commons, frequently forcing the planet’s citizens into protests that most governments deem too disruptive to sanction.

Extinction Rebellion, a U.K.-founded climate change group whose actions tend to disrupt daily life (for example, through members blockading bridges or gluing themselves to the windows of Parliament’s House of Commons) but are not violent, was called out by Scotland Yard’s former chief of counter-terrorism as an “extremist anarchist group.”⁴ The Earl of Warwick and King Edward VI likely felt the same about Robert Kett and his followers. It’s hard to know whether Extinction Rebellion’s tactics would be so inconvenient to those who hold the reins of power if its message—stop climate change and abandon fossil fuel extraction and use—weren’t even more so. As new as actions like these might feel, they are an ancient necessity.

Will we common people ever escape servitude to enjoy true freedom and justice, as Robert Kett hoped to do? I don’t know. Most of the time, I doubt it. But perhaps we’ve come to the point where we have no other choice. There are no more frontiers to run away to—even colonizing space requires the acquiescence and resources of Earth’s citizens. There are no more lands like the American West to invade and settle. The climate crisis guarantees that there are fewer myths we can talk ourselves into believing, whether it’s that a complete free market will always serve the public good, or that our own futures are separate from the fate of Nature writ large. But if we do come to discard the servile life in favor of just conditions for all, it will be because those same common people took a stand against injustices of all kinds and in as many ways as possible. Ecological citizenship isn’t something we need to invent anew. It’s always been there. We just have to rediscover the capacity for it within ourselves.


**NOTES**

1. Peter Linebaugh, interview by Laura Flanders, “Peter Linebaugh: Who Owns the Commons? An 800 Year Fight for the Public Good,” The Laura Flanders Show, January 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSF3m_Uav6Y [The quoted material starts at about 11:00.]


Like many a stowaway species before me, I arrived by boat, oblivious to where I would land.

My parents took me to Ireland as a baby to escape many things, not least the tightening grip of a necrotic political ideology on the other side of the Irish Sea. They hoped to take root in a place that hadn’t been swept by the advancing neoliberal spirit: Thatcherism, privatization, inequality, a tendency toward clone towns and hollowed-out high streets, barbed individualism. Rural, with relatively cheap property and a low population density, Ireland served as a refuge then for the United Kingdom’s outcasts, anarchists, and rebels. To some extent, it still does.

The Irish economic boom, known as the “Celtic Tiger,” had not yet brought fully fledged aspirations of progress and cosmopolitan prosperity to the Irish psyche. People were still accustomed to emigrating to encounter such things, in the buzz of London, Sydney, or New York. In the early 1990s, those most mobile of global citizens—multinational corporations—had only started to be drawn to these green shores by convoluted tax breaks. Over subsequent decades, they would flock here to build their monumental headquarters, town-sized factories, and power-hungry data centers.

During my childhood, Ireland remained a predominantly agricultural country: the rural midlands where I spent that time were a place of turf smoke, lush and luminous grass, line dancing, Gaelic sports, and brown pubs named after the families that had tended them for generations. It was full of who-are-you-related-to questions and a solid dose of Catholic patriarchy. Growing up in such a place, it was impossible to forget that I was different. An invader of sorts.

I had no memory of being connected to anywhere else, but nor, on the road to adulthood, did I feel particularly welcome either. I formed my first words in Ireland, but my accent was not quite right. My name, my English provenance, would be a source of distaste, particularly amongst those my own age, though I doubt they understood why they felt as they did.

It was all inherited and unthinking; the logic of intergenerational conflict. Irish people are supposed to hate the English; my parents were English; therefore, they should hate me. I grew up, after all, just a few miles from where the Irish War of Independence had begun. Seventy years later, it continued to be a heartland of nationalism. Up the Ra.
And why shouldn’t my presence have made them uncomfortable? There was bitter struggle going on in Northern Ireland for civil rights and freedom from British rule. Protestant pitted against Catholic, English against Irish. I was getting off lightly, just feeling the warmth on my face from a more distant, older, life-annihilating blaze.

Nature has an uncanny—almost magical—ability to disrespect any human notion of borders or nationhood. It overruns, evades, floods with abundance.

The early 1990s saw hundreds of Irish Republican Army attacks— attempts to kick against British colonialism, along with the requisite brutality of retaliations. It was a vicious cycle with centuries-old roots. On the day before my third birthday, a one-ton bomb exploded outside the Baltic Exchange building in London. It was the biggest bomb to explode in England since the Second World War. Three died, and ninety-one were injured. An even bigger one destroyed the center of Manchester in 1996, when I was seven. The scene had been evacuated, but such was its power that 212 people were still injured by the debris, which showered down half a mile away. The Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland, when I was nine, is my earliest, cloudiest memory of the Troubles—an incomprehensible horror, watched from afar, on the six o’clock news. Twenty-nine died, and 220 others were injured.

That war is not my story to tell, though the deep-set tensions of belonging that underlie it explain, for instance, why I would sometimes turn up to my Protestant primary school to find a stone had been thrown through the window. The school was small—just two rooms—and attached to the end of a string of Catholic schools as though it was an afterthought. We were different from the other children, with their uniforms and regular bouts of Confession, though I had no great understanding of why. Why did they take part in traditional Irish sports, and we didn’t? Why did we play just meters away from each other during break times, but were never allowed to talk or interact?

A stone, a childhood jibe, institutional separation based on religion; these are not terrors. So I dug in my heels. Looking for belonging, looking for an identity, and looking at my parents, I used to say I was English—whatever that means to a child who had no memory of ever having lived in that country. Then I visited England, and people there said I was Irish.

I am a weed, I suppose—a plant in the wrong place. I am non-native.

Can I still use the word “nature” in these postmodern times? If so, I would say that nature has an uncanny—almost magical—ability to disrespect any human notion of borders or nationhood. It overruns, evades, floods with abundance. It is relentless.

If a single plant of a particular species can produce millions of wind-dispersed seeds in its lifetime, or if a mushroom can release 31,000 ballistospores per second, then human walls and fences become an irrelevance for these beings. Our animal kin, too, like to confound human designs. Spiders have been discovered to sense the Earth’s electric field and harness it to soar vast distances. Arachnid aviators have been encountered miles in the air, even one thousand miles out at sea. The world’s most prolific migrant, the Arctic tern, will fly about 1.5 million miles over its lifetime—equivalent to three round-trips to the moon. I imagine them sometimes, looking down at our gated communities and barbed-wire borders, and laughing.

Sometimes—especially when accelerated by human empire and technologies—this abundant disregard causes ecological chaos and destruction. Think, for instance, of the boat-borne rats who arrived to annihilate biodiversity on the Galapagos Archipelago, or the Zebra mussels who clog waterways across Europe and North America. It is normally then that science labels the newcomer a “non-native”—or, more specifically, “invasive”—species.

Sometimes this abundance works in more favorable ways. “Native” species that had long been driven out of a particular region suddenly reappear when the right conditions return for them. The great iconoclast and Native Studies scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., recounted Indigenous beliefs that species never actually become extinct, they simply “go away and do not come back until the location is being treated properly.” The Sioux, furthermore, believed that vast herds of buffalo disappeared underground in wintertime, only to re-emerge from their subterranean sanctuaries in spring.

Such stories cradle an ecological truth. Recent experiences of the remarkably rapid recoveries that result when agricultural land is allowed to regenerate through self-willed processes—(re)wilding—back this up. It is a process being observed time and again, in various areas across Europe where wolves, bison, beavers, and other species are making a hearty comeback,
usually in places where civilized land management is forced into decline.

In many cases, however, the line cast between native and non-native is remarkably confused, even arbitrary. In Ireland, for example, the sycamore tree is not native, having been introduced in the seventeenth century. Yet it is culturally accepted as benign in a way that many other non-natives are not.

The civilized mind—the one accustomed to agricultural fences and militarized borders—tends to attach to certain stories of belonging and deals in a confused way with the grayness, the voids, the non-stop churn of natural abundance. The common rhododendron, mandarin ducks, fallow deer, brown hares. Despite all having been present in the British Isles during the last interglacial period, 100,000 years ago, they are no longer counted as native. Yet the brown hare, like the sycamore, is accepted as part of the landscape, in spite of its non-native status. It even has its own Species Action Plan under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan.

Perhaps we can clarify the route from citizen to denizen by observing, for example, the real differences between an ecological citizen—as a light green, apolitical, or greenwashed concept—and an ecological citizen—something less obedient, predictable, and subservient. The latter glows a deeper shade of wild and disobedient green.

Like these liminal species, an initial series of events has meant that I am a citizen of a country that I didn’t grow up in and, due to a second unfortunate series of events, the country I grew up in will no longer allow me to “naturalize,” to obtain citizenship, to be seen as one of its own. Forgive me, then, if I am somewhat wary of attempts to renovate the concept of citizenship—in the form of “ecological citizenship.” While it may have gained traction over recent years, the term tends to be used in myriad ways, some of which appear to reduce the very possibility of meaningful deviation from the ecocidal machine many of us were born into.

And yet, here is a relatively new term—ecological citizenship—that shows remarkable resilience. Just as the concrete meanings of citizenship—its relation to law, property, individuals, the state—have changed so much over time, it has flourished and spread, tapping into what is evidently fertile ground. It springs up and persists like a weed, and I have long been taught to see weeds as storytellers, not enemies: they do not exist simply to impede human plans, but to speak to us of what the land wants, what it wishes to become.

It may prove fruitful to see ecological citizenship in this way, then, and to harness it, work with it. If I, or the sycamore tree, or the hare, do not officially belong—if we are not truly “naturalized,” or cannot become citizens—then where do we stand? What is our role? However careful we have to be around the blurry edges, belonging to a place, being native to it, surely means something.

I once moved onto a piece of land in the west of Ireland, excited and energetic, only to discover that the previous owner had craftily failed to inform us that it was harboring Japanese knotweed—that most feared of invasive, non-native plants. This invader is so feared, so destructive, that its intentional propagation, planting, or spreading can lead to prosecution.

Stories of a creeping threat that can crack open concrete, undermine house foundations, and is near-impossible to eradicate gave me cold sweats. I waited for its tentacles to creep in through the windows and strangle me in the middle of the night. And, sure enough, knotweed shoots emerged prolifically, in the newly planted herb garden, at the edge of the lawn, in the raised beds.

The battle began: man against plant.

Frantically, I tore at it, hoping to weaken it, to dent its spirit, only for it to come back, seemingly stronger than ever. It was a foolish act. I knew that. Any attempt to dig it up would just worsen the problem—leaving fragments of root throughout the soil from which the enemy would emerge anew.

It was a losing battle.

Eventually we gave up, deciding to see what would happen if we left the land to fend for itself for a time. Remarkably, a balance was gradually struck. Our non-action gave the soil and existing flora time to weave together again and, over time, a more resilient ecological community formed. We stopped seeing the knotweed so much and, even when we did, we didn’t lose sleep.

Invasives will normally gain a foothold in places that have already been disrupted by human development: it is no coincidence that knotweed normally thrives at the edges of roads and
fields and railway tracks and building sites. The problem is not non-native invaders, the problem is not non-citizens, and the problem is not migration. The problem is not the problem, as the phrase goes. Ecological disruption is a symptom of a way of life—an imperial mode of existence that alienates us, that doesn’t allow “us” to find and keep our relationships, that obliterates ecological integrity.

Let me go back a few steps. From the Latin civitas, meaning city, citizenship is something bestowed upon the civilized, signifying belonging within a space of human exceptionalism. With regards to its contested history, it is hardly novel to note that affluent men and property owners were the citizens of ancient Greece, not women, slaves, or the poor. The latter were better categorized as “non-naturalized”—as excluded others—and have been treated as such in most “civilized” societies, often to this day.

Citizenship, furthermore, is an individually held attribute. Citizens can be strangers to each other and, too often, strangers to the land they supposedly belong to. Can humans and non-humans form long-lasting, mutualistic bonds? I would say yes. Can both be citizens? No.

The emergence of citizenship, finally, was profoundly connected to urbanity, hierarchy, and, in recent times, the nation-state—that least ecological of human creations. With borders that slice bioregions apart like a butcher wielding a cleaver, the very philosophical basis of the modern state apparatus—social contract theory—is premised on the idea of humanity as having advanced beyond a brutish “state of nature.” The civilized are thus liberated from the dirt and chaos. Or so they like to think.

Given this liberation, citizens claim that land belongs to them. Indeed, they usually have the papers to prove it. We make a grave mistake, however, when we forget that the opposite is the primary relation: we belong to the land.

Perhaps, then, it is time to expand the lexicon of belonging.

Rather than translating or expanding current understandings of citizenship for a time of ecological breakdown, through the notion of ecological citizenship, the environmental philosopher Mick Smith opts to re-center on the term denizen. This, he says, is less weighed down with anthropocentric baggage than citizen. For the denizen:

Her being is not articulated through a formal order, it is not rule governed but expressive of a more radical form of life. She is one who “comes from within” a place or has become “naturalized” (one might also say acculturated) to a place over time.... Denizens might be beings of all kinds, not just human beings.

At present, Smith warns, “Responsibility is, like everything else, being privatized, this time under the rubric of ‘environmental citizenship.’” These new, improved citizens “are first exhorted, and then when this fails, conscripted and compelled, to take responsibility for the state of the same world they find themselves alienated from.”

Not long ago, a good ecological citizen was one who killed wolves or drained wetlands. These were the virtuous activities of the past, however destructive and absurd they may appear in hindsight. Today, we are exhorted to take shorter showers, refrain from pre-heating our ovens, recycle our plastics. None of these activities come from listening to what the land aches for. The underlying system remains destructive and absurd, and if such appeals are beginning to ring hollow, that is because we know in our hearts that they are.

There is truth to the charges of tepid reformism that have been aimed at ecological citizenship as it is often understood. The philosopher Andrew Dobson—who has perhaps done the most to bring the concept to prominence over recent decades—wrote that “environmental citizens have a responsibility to work towards a sustainable society, and this embraces all the activities one might normally think of as relating to good environmental citizenship: recycling, reusing, conserving.”

That “normally” is a sneaky term. A more valid restatement of his words might be: “You have no real control or say over the machinic rhythm, but let’s keep the system ticking over please.” The scale and complexity of technological civilization increasingly preclude the possibility of any truly democratic ecological citizenship. We are consumers, (dis)connected through the market, more often than citizens—whether global, ecological, or otherwise. We are users, not participants.

Proponents of environmental citizenship, including Dobson, have furthermore long held that engagement with ecological citizenship may be best implemented in the school system. If future generations are to learn how to be good citizens during civics class, then surely they can learn to be good ecological citizens while they’re at it?

This all only works if we take the most naïve perspective. The place where we send our children to be molded into good workers, good servants of the machine, where we lock them in a room and discipline out of them all wildness and spontaneity,
is surely the worst place to start the journey of becoming a denizen. If it is to be more than a surface dressing on a deeper wound, environmental citizenship must begin in the woods, in the scrubland, in the cracks in the sidewalk, in the self-willed ecosystem, in cultural mythologies, and not in the textbooks and screwed-down rows of the sterile classroom.

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Place. Culture. Identity. Belonging. They are entwined things, beautiful things, powerful, deep, and necessary things, toxic things, limiting things, primitive things.

—Paul Kingsnorth

Perhaps we can clarify the route from citizen to denizen by observing, for example, the real differences between an ecological citizen—as a light green, apolitical, or greenwashed concept (akin to tacking the word “sustainable” in front of development)—and an ecological citizen—something less obedient, predictable, and subservient. The latter glows a deeper shade of wild and disobedient green. Perhaps, conceptualized in this way, it can overflow any current understanding of ecological citizenship, which, as we saw above, tends to sidestep the inconvenience of an ecocidal status quo. While the emphasis on citizenship reproduces historical trends of subservient belonging and sees the citizen as a rational individual whose behaviors must be modified, the emphasis on “ecological” is something much closer to Smith’s notion of denizen: always yet-unformed; the rewilding of self, society, and landscape.

We may also be well served by speaking of becoming a denizen as a process of dwelling. Dwelling and citizenship often overlap, but they are certainly not the same. Heidegger said that “to be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word bauen, which says that man is insofar as he dwells, this word bauen however also means at the same time to cherish and protect, to care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.” The dweller is a practiced member of their place; they feel a certain chest-ache when forced into exile, when displaced from the things they may not have even known made them feel at home. This is an animal pain that grows from a place, from shared experiences, belief, practices, mythology, and belonging.

“Naturalization” would be much better used to describe the process of dwelling, of moving from citizen to denizen, and not vice versa, as it currently is. I will admit that these are awkward—albeit necessary—conversations to have in these polarizing times. Less benign versions of nationalism and belonging are on the rise, spreading like knotweed, sullying all around them. We live at a time in which you can be prosecuted for the humanitarian act of leaving caches of water in the desert between the United States and Mexico, or for rescuing refugees adrift in the Mediterranean. The border walls are going up, and it’s clear who will be unwelcome.

I have long been taught to see weeds as storytellers, not enemies: they do not exist simply to impede human plans, but to speak to us of what the land wants, what it wishes to become. …It may prove fruitful to see ecological citizenship in this way, then, and to harness it, work with it.

It is unfortunate, then, that in response to the border walls, there is an increasingly fashionable strain of green thought that would wash its hands of any discussion like the one I have engaged in above. To these armchair urbanites, even discussing tricky notions of place connection or localism—concepts that have been foundational to environmentalism—is inherently reactionary, harking back to Nazi “blood and soil” rhetoric. The mention of such stuffy old things is to be decried as völkisch or even proto-fascist.

However, it is the very refusal to have those conversations—the failure to recognize growing from within a place as a fundamental aspect of the human condition—that is not just misguided, but dangerous. The alternatives they often propose—grounded in philosophies of flux, rootlessness, and the misuse of ideas like cyborg ecologies—seem like a cop-out. This is merely avoiding the difficult and crucial stuff of human life, the daily work. It will backfire.

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And so, here I sit, awaiting a decision from some bureaucrat on whether I can become an Irish citizen or not. After the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, there was a rush for Irish passports. Many of the people applying had never even set foot in Ireland, let alone lived there for most of their lives, as I have. Many openly admitted that they simply want to maintain the convenience of easy access to the rest of Europe. For these people, becoming a citizen of the place I grew up is seen merely as a means to an end—a pernicious modern form of colonialism.
I hold out little hope for sense to prevail in my strange case. My status as a weed feels certain, fixed. Whatever the decision, however, I will know what direction home lies in. I will continue to feel those indescribable feelings of resonance whenever I look out over the fields that I walked across as a child. No paperwork can validate that. No civics class can teach it. I will be a denizen, and that, ultimately, means more to me, and to the Earth, than any form of citizenship.

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NOTES
7. Ibid.
14. I am aware here, and in the discussion that follows, both of the prominence of dwelling in Martin Heidegger’s philosophy and of his problematic politics.
18. They make such links with some historical precedent, of course. See J. Biehl and P. Staudenmaier, Ecofascism Revisited: Lessons from the German Experience (Porsgrunn, Norway: New Compass Press, 2011).
Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.

—Pope Francis, May 24, 2015, Laudato Si

Those fighting for rights and freedom know that change never just happens.

It may seem that the bending of the “arc of the moral universe... toward justice” about which Dr. Martin Luther King spoke—witnessed with the abolishment of slavery, the recognition of rights of indigenous peoples, of African-Americans, of women—is inevitable. It’s not. It never has been.

The long history of people’s movements shows us that fundamental shifts in society only occur when people join together to demand such change. This requires mass mobilization across countries, cultures, religions, and even time—taking decades, generations, and centuries to achieve—each requiring major shifts in consciousness to achieve major shifts in law and governance.

Today, as we face overlapping environmental crises, we need a fundamental shift in humankind’s relationship with the natural world—this means a major shift in how we govern ourselves toward nature. To achieve this requires advancing major societal and cultural shifts, as well—that is, changing how societies think about nature and humanity’s role as part of it, and the recognition that nature is worthy of respect, protection, and rights.

THE ROLE OF FAITH IN CULTURAL SHIFTS

One of the first places I ever spoke publicly about the rights of nature was at the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon, in 2009. As part of the Econvergence Symposium, I presented on a panel that focused on how unfettered economic growth was driving us to environmental and economic crisis.

It is axiomatic that religion plays a major role in shaping culture. What we believe and how we think about the world are often deeply influenced by our faith. For instance, a 2015 Pew Research Center report found that over 60 percent of white evangelical Protestants in the United States do not believe in human evolution. By contrast, over 85 percent of those without a religious affiliation believe in human evolution.

Too often, religion has been wielded to legitimize the oppression of others, including nature. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull which divided the world between Portugal and Spain, mandating that they colonize the new world and ensure that “barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.” Subjugation of both nature and people had the blessing of the Catholic Church.

Karenna Gore, director of the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York, described the historic role of the church in defining our relationship with nature. In her keynote address at the 2017 Rights of Nature Symposium held at Tulane Law School, she explained:

The way that Christianity has been interpreted from medieval Europe to the age of colonization to the efforts in the
1950s in America to wed it to capitalism through moves like putting “In God We Trust” on the money... to the contemporary expressions of the Prosperity Gospel, mainstream religion has contributed to the objectification and exploitation of nature.

But Gore also spoke of the shift in consciousness within faith to protect nature, including the rights of nature: “There has been a lot of recent effort to retrieve and revive the ecological sensibility within the Judeo-Christian tradition, including reinterpretations of the Bible based on ancient Aramaic and Hebrew and Greek.”

Just as we’re seeing people of faith today advocate protection of nature, during the colonial era we saw people of faith advocate for abolishing slavery. In 1688, the Quakers of Germantown, Pennsylvania, issued their protest against slavery, writing, “There is a saying, that we shall doe to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or colour they are.” In the United States and Britain, Quakers would become a leading voice of opposition against slavery and the slave trade.

Faith played an important role in shifting societal perspectives on slavery, making possible the abolishment of slavery. President Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation attempted to free the slaves in the South, stated in 1860, just a year before the start of the Civil War:

I think that if anything can be proved by natural theology, it is that slavery is morally wrong. God gave man a mouth to receive bread, hands to feed it, and his hand has a right to carry bread to his mouth without controversy.

Today—as species extinction occurs far faster than natural background rates, as coral reefs are bleaching and dying off in the world’s oceans, as climate change accelerates—we are once again seeing faith play an important role in driving necessary change.

Just as the Old Testament and religious teachings speak of man’s dominion over the Earth, helping drive the belief that humankind is separate from and superior to nature, today some leading voices in the faith community are showing a new way of understanding.

In 2015, Pope Francis received worldwide praise for his encyclical on the environment, Laudato Si’, in which he called for the protection of “our common home.” He begins by quoting Saint Francis of Assisi, who said it is “Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us.”

Later that same year, Pope Francis spoke again on the need to protect nature, and specifically the rights of nature. In his September 2015 address before the United Nations General Assembly, he said:

First, it must be stated that a true “right of the environment” does exist, for two reasons. First, because we human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect.... He possesses a body shaped by physical, chemical and biological elements, and can only survive and develop if the ecological environment is favourable. Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity. Second, because every creature, particularly a living creature, has an intrinsic value, in its existence, its life, its beauty and its interdependence with other creatures. We Christians, together with the other monotheistic religions, believe that the universe is the fruit of a loving decision by the Creator, who permits man respectfully to use creation for the good of his fellow men and for the glory of the Creator; he is not authorized to abuse it, much less to destroy it. In all religions, the environment is a fundamental good.

**THE ROLE OF FAITH IN GOVERNANCE**

We are also beginning to see the role that faith can play toward achieving environmental protection through change in law and governance.

Recently, faith leaders have taken notable steps toward the recognition of legal rights of nature. In 2019, the Church of Sweden decided to include the rights of nature within its program for learning and teaching. In the same year, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines issued “An Urgent Call for Ecological Conversion, Hope in the Face of Climate Emergency,” in which it calls for the recognition of the rights of nature. Citing Pope Francis’s statement before the United Nations four years prior, the Bishops wrote:

The recognition of the Rights of Nature is at the core of the call for ecological conversion.... The prevalent anthropocentric and utilitarian perspectives tend to negate our traditional role of responsible stewardship and deny the reality that humans are part of nature.

For more than a year, I have been working with the Philippine-Misereor Partnership (PMPI)—which includes a large network of faith-based groups—to draft and introduce rights of nature legislation into the Philippine Congress.
legislation—which was introduced into the Senate in October 2019—would recognize the rights of nature “to exist; to the maintenance of the vital cycles, functions and processes that ensure their continued sustainability and well-being; to the conditions necessary for their renewal and restoration; and to adequate and effective representation vis-à-vis the protection and enforcement of these rights.” In a country that “proclaims to be the only Christian nation in Asia,” the role and influence of the Catholic Bishops is significant. Within their Pastoral Letter, the Philippine Bishops write, “we commit to live the spirit and principles of Laudato Si’ through the following concrete ecological actions,” including to “organize and educate people into a well-informed and empowered citizenry using all means available including mainstream and social media platforms for the passage of into law of bills aimed at protecting our common home, such as the Rights of Nature Bill.”

And thus, while we know that faith shapes culture, it is also true that it can facilitate a change in culture.

As with past people’s movements, our task today to make a fundamental shift in law—this time involving a transformation in how we govern ourselves toward nature—will require major shifts in culture as well. Whether we are religious, spiritual, agnostic, or atheist, it is important to recognize that faith has played an important role in past social justice movements and must do so yet again.

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN RIGHTS OF NATURE LAW**

The idea that nature possesses rights is fairly new. It first gained notice when University of Southern California law professor Christopher D. Stone wrote his seminal law review article, “Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects,” in 1972. In it, he described the harm that comes to nature when it is not recognized as possessing legal rights and made the case for why nature should thus become a “rights-holder.”

He explained that legal systems consider nature to be without “legally recognized worth and dignity in its own right.” Similar to laws in other countries, conventional environmental laws in the United States—including the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act—regard nature as something that does not have rights. This means that nature is treated as mere property—an object that legally can be exploited, serving only “as a means to benefit ‘us’”—the us, of course, being humankind. Thus, nature does not possess even the most basic right to exist. In practice, this has led to legalizing activities such as fracking for oil and gas; mountaintop removal mining, which involves dynamiting the tops off of mountains to mine coal; factory farming; dumping toxins into the air and water; and the list goes on. As Stone writes, “What the courts are balancing, with varying degrees of directness, are the economic hardships” to people—rather than the hardships to nature—that come from environmental harms like polluting a river. When we do this, he notes, “what does not weigh in the balance is the damage to” nature itself.

Moreover, laws that we rely on to protect nature, such as the federal Endangered Species Act, often have their protections undermined by activities authorized by other laws. For instance, in the United States, federal and state laws authorize fossil fuel extraction and production, leading to increases in global warming emissions and the acceleration of climate change. Climate change is a significant threat to ESA-listed species. As a recent study published in *Nature Climate Change* found: “Of the 459 animal species listed as endangered by the U.S. government, researchers found that all but one, or 99.8 percent, have characteristics that will make it difficult for them to adapt to rising temperatures.”

As the consequences of such laws became clearer, and as people in communities in different parts of the United States have become aware of how little protection there is to be found under environmental law, a new form of law to recognize nature’s rights has begun to emerge. It was borne from the recognition that we simply cannot continue with business as usual. Making existing environmental laws better does not keep the harm from happening—i.e., attempting to make things like fracking a little less damaging still means that we’re getting fracked. Instead, it is time to begin thinking about nature, and our relationship with nature, differently.

From that re-thinking emerged the first law to secure legal rights of nature. The “Tamaqua Borough Corporate Waste and Local Control Ordinance” was enacted by the small community of Tamaqua in rural Pennsylvania, in the United States, in 2006. As more communities in Pennsylvania—along with some in New Hampshire—began to move rights of nature laws forward, their efforts were noted by the Quito-based organization Fundación Pachamama in Ecuador, which advocates for indigenous rights and environmental protections. Fundación Pachamama at the time was engaging with elected delegates to Ecuador’s Constituent Assembly on drafting the country’s new constitution. In 2008, I was invited to meet with delegates to talk about securing the constitutional rights of nature as part of this process and to discuss why Ecuadorians would want and need to protect nature with this highest form of legal protection. There were members of the Assembly itself—including Alberto Acosta, Assembly president—who championed the inclusion of rights of nature in the new constitution. And
in September 2008, with insight provided by the earlier rights of nature laws in the United States, Ecuador became the first country in the world to enshrine the rights of nature—or Pacha Mama—in a national constitution.

In another South American example, a Colombia Constitutional Court decision in 2016 recognizing the rights of Rio Atrato explained the need to transform our relationship with nature this way:

Justice with nature must be applied beyond the human scenario and must allow nature to be a subject of rights... The prevailing view is economic, where biodiversity, genetic material and associated traditional knowledge are seen as susceptible of appropriation, industrial use and source of economic gain. In this way, policies and legislation have emphasized access to economic use and exploitation to the detriment of the protection of the rights of the environment and of communities.16

Today, there are also national rights of nature laws in place in Uganda and Bolivia; courts in India and Colombia have recognized rights of rivers and other ecosystems; in Bangladesh all rivers have been recognized as possessing rights; and communities in Brazil and the United States have enacted laws securing the legal rights of the natural world.

These early occurrences of lawmaking and court decisions in themselves are an important marker of the drive for change.

EXERCISING OUR RIGHTS AS CITIZENS

As each of us wrestles with what we can do to protect nature, we must first have the political decision-making authority to do so. This means that we must not only be able to take personal steps, such as recycling or composting, to limit our ecological footprint, but we must also be able to take steps to exercise our rights as citizens to protect nature, such as being able to vote on new laws or to enforce existing laws that secure nature’s rights.

Yet today our right to protect nature is very limited. Governments—at state and national levels—restrict what we as citizens can do. These restrictions include pre-empting city councils and other local governments from putting in place stronger protections for nature than are in place at a state or national level. Environmental laws are also generally very restrictive on how or if citizens can enforce them, particularly when their own governments fail to do so.

Recognizing this, in our organizing to protect the rights of nature at the Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights, we often discuss with our partners the critical role that democratic rights play as part of protecting nature’s rights. For instance, conventional environmental laws often make it extremely difficult for “we the people” to play any role in protecting nature, including by seeking to enforce existing environmental laws. This is why we advocate for building strong citizen enforcement provisions into rights of nature laws. This was the case in our discussions with delegates to Ecuador’s Constituent Assembly regarding their constitution. We were pleased that the final constitutional framework in Ecuador contained provisions for citizen enforcement. For example, in Article 71 of the constitution, “All persons, communities, peoples and nations can call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature.” This authorizes individuals to be able to go to court to enforce and defend the rights of nature. And this is precisely what people in Ecuador have done.

In the first court case to be decided under Ecuador’s 2008 constitution, two individuals—Richard Frederick Wheeler and Eleanor Geer Huddle—filed their case to enforce the rights of the Vilcabamba River. The river’s natural flow and water quality were being degraded by nearby road construction. Wheeler and Huddle exercised their rights to “stand in the shoes” of the river to defend and enforce the river’s rights. Most conventional environmental laws require people to demonstrate that they have the right to appear in court by first proving they themselves have experienced harm as a result of harm done to nature. However, Ecuador’s rights of nature constitutional framework is concerned with the harm to nature itself.

To empower us as ecological citizens, we must have the authority to be able to protect nature—not only in our own backyards, but in our collective backyard of planet Earth. This means taking hold of our democratic rights to make the decisions we need to make to protect nature. My organization, the Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights (CDER), assists people, communities, governments, and others to take such steps. For example, below are three concrete steps CDER is working on with individuals and organizations in different parts of the world. These are steps aimed at securing the highest legal protection for nature through the recognition of its legal rights and strengthening the democratic rights of people to protect it:

- Learning more about the connection between our rights as citizens and the rights of nature by participating in CDER workshops that explore what these rights are and the strategies for securing them.17
- Sharing what people learn by encouraging them to engage with their families, friends, and neighbors and to talk with faith leaders, civil society groups, governmental officials,
and elected representatives. In order to change our relationship with the natural world to one of sustainability and harmony, we need to change societal thinking. We can begin that process ourselves, by involving the people around us who influence us and represent us. The Church of Sweden made its decision to incorporate the rights of nature into its curriculum because citizens engaged in a dialogue with church leaders on the rights of nature. “We the people” have more power and influence than we realize.

Lastly, building on learning and community engagement by launching campaigns to protect the rights of nature in communities, regions, or countries. This kind of action can be anything from engaging with a city council to advancing a citizen-sponsored legislative initiative at the national level.

CONCLUSION

As the environmental crisis grows, our role as ecological citizens will become increasingly important. We must become more empowered to protect nature. In its ruling in the Rio Atrato case, which impacted indigenous people living within the river basin, Colombia’s Constitutional Court took important steps to empower them:

In this sense, the Court considers it necessary to carry out a call for attention to the ethnic communities that inhabit the Atrato river basin so that they protect, within their own customs, uses and traditions, the environment for which they are its guardians.

In order to effectively comply with this declaration, the Court will order that the Colombian State exercise legal guardianship and representation of the rights of the river in conjunction with the ethnic communities that inhabit the Atrato river basin in Chocó; in this way, the Atrato river and its basin—from hereon—will be represented by a member of the plaintiff communities and a delegate of the Colombian State.18

Enabling massive shifts in humankind’s relationship with the natural world to achieve sustainability and true environmental protection requires us to change how we think and how we live on the Earth. Such a shift requires us to broaden our own rights as people and the rights of nature. We must come together to do this, yet we remain divided by nationality, geography, class, ethnicity, and, of course, by faith. As nature knows no political, social, racial, demographic, or religious boundaries, perhaps it can serve to unite us, rather than divide us—bridging our differences where so few other aspects of our lives can. Then we can exercise our collective Earth citizenship.

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NOTES

5. For information on the Center’s work, see https://centerforearthethics.org/.
6. For the text of the Protest, see https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.14000200/?st=text.
7. A. Lincoln, Speech delivered in Hartford, Connecticut, on March 5, 1860, as published in the Hartford Daily Courant, March 6, 1860, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=lincoln;cc=lincoln;view=toyposimo;idno=d1lq1;g=march.05%201860;v=text;subview=detail;coll=occur;dn=lincoln4;node=lincoln4.2.
10. For further information see: https://www.facebook.com/philimisereor/.
17. For additional information, see https://www.centerforenvironmentalrights.org/trainings-webinars.
Wolverines once walked Michigan but now are rare sightings equated with rumors and illusory fancy. To be fair, Anishinaabeg never cared much for wolverines, who were said to have come to Aki (Earth) in a shooting star that impacted the land. Always seen as out of place, wolverines were fierce animals who made their presence known by pissing in our food just to let us know they didn’t want us anywhere nearby. Nonetheless, the thought of their presence returns us to another generation—one before colonization, before apocalypse.

The way I understand it, from an Anishinaabekwe perspective passed on to me from my mother, we are already living in the post-apocalypse. Life as we knew it has been fundamentally interrupted, devastated, and shifted. Genocide occurred through war, the spread of diseases, and strategic, government-led removal of Indigenous peoples in order to open up land for the taking by businesses and settlers. Along with the echo of trauma that resonates through generations caused by policies that prevent cultural practices and tactics such as taking Indigenous children away to residential schools, assimilation and ongoing colonization continue to impact Indigenous communities today. So instead of imagining a future of devastation, we recognize what has already happened and ask what it is we can do in the present with hope for the next generations.
We can walk and sing for the waters, carrying them in copper to amplify the resonation of our voices, our hopes, our good thoughts. Just as we carry the waters, the waters carry us, sustaining our lives and the interrelations that connect us all. It is our responsibility to clean the waters, to keep those waters clean continuously, and to recognize and honor the role of water as life.

As we walk, we repeat the lessons of bears, who are protectors. They are known also for their knowledge of plant medicines, thanks to their attentive pacing as they patrol the perimeters of territories they are intended to care for. Stars, who reflect on the waters, watched the ways in which Bear so carefully traversed the land and gifted to Bear teachings about how to gather and use plants as medicines. It was through our mindful observations of Bear that we, too, learned that knowledge must be reciprocated with care, through tending plants, growing plants, and caring for the lands.

Unfortunately, our ability to care for Aki as we once did has been prevented through colonial restrictions. Practices such as controlled burning have been limited or even banned in many places, and hunting, fishing, and gathering has been dictated often without Indigenous input, leading to issues of either overgrowth or undergrowth and an overall lack of balance, which affects us all. It is only in returning to knowledge inherent

Elizabeth LaPensée, Communication, 2014
Elizabeth LaPensée, *Our Grandmothers Carry Water from the Other World*, 2016

Elizabeth LaPensée, *The Water Carries Her, She Carries the Water*, 2016
to Aki that the next generations will thrive. As Aki breathes herself into form, we need to breathe with her and to replicate the teachings of traditional ecological knowledge in order to move toward an ecologically robust future. Individualization only furthers divides. Interrelated ecosystems call on us to also work collaboratively for restoring connections and enacting balance.

Regardless of whether destruction of Aki is addressed, or ongoing, Indigenous people will carry on. Our Aunties are fierce, with laughter that can both fill a room with the greatest warmth and cut a person open like a sharp knife. Laughter is medicine, in both of these cases. Grandmothers have the immense strength and perseverance to even travel to another planet to gather water, singing songs passed down through the generations to sustain us all, a shimmering future of copper glinting as pails sway along paths of red land.

Whichever path, the one of restoration or the one of destruction, we all can look to the emergence of hybridity as a way not only to survive, but to thrive. These days, in Michigan in Nkwejong (meaning Where the Waters Meet) coywolves walk where there were once waterways that have since been drained for streets. Coywolves are mixes of coyotes and wolves who take on varying traits. They are able to support themselves independently during the isolation necessary for safety, as well
as to meet up with their community and honor the collective efforts of all. Even when apart, they communicate through howls, and in doing so know they are never truly alone. They recognize their territories and uphold their responsibilities to those places, whether among grasses or concrete. They show us the hope for continuance through the embrace of change.

Adaptation is a continuum, and those who came before us set the path forward. As Anishinaabeg stopped at places along their migration journey to where food grows on water, they counseled together about their responsibilities for the well-being of their communities and their connections to lands, waters, and all life. Although some families went in their own directions and established themselves in different places, all Anishinaabeg still sustain the connection of their approach to mino-bimaadiziwin (living a good life). There is no one right way, but rather many ways to be responsible for ecological well-being. It is on us to reinforce our interrelations with all life and to ask ourselves, with hope for well-being for lands, waters, and all interconnected life: What ways will we carry on from those who came before us? What ways can we adapt for our current situation? What ways will we generate that can be passed on for the generations ahead?

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Elizabeth LaPensée, Memories of the Future, 2015
Ava Carney, A Genius of the Spot I, 2020, glazed ceramic, 28" x 13" x 10"
When I think of ecological citizenship, the first words that come to mind are sustainability, mindfulness, and empathy. I also think about change, and the kind of changes that are needed to become an ecological citizen or an ecological society. Changing a personal habit is difficult, but altering systems established on a global scale is intimidating enough to make it seem impossible. In this critical environmental moment, how do we support and motivate each other? How do we increase our capacity for empathy? How can we embrace curiosity and innovation over acceptance and fatalism?

Throughout the last year, I considered these questions in more detail during a residency where I made sculptures in response to a public garden. Two years ago, I would not have pictured myself making work for a natural space, but the residency, which was held at a ceramic studio in a park, slowly shifted my focus away from traditional venues. At the very least, artwork in a gallery or museum has the ability to make us stop and look, but how does our response change when art is situated in the living landscape?

In *Thinking the Sculpture Garden*, theorist Penny Florence explains that “art in tension with the natural... is very different from the old binaries of wilderness-cultivation, art-nature or artwork-context” and offers the possibility of the “garden as something articulating a further reaching philosophy that helps us to think about what it is to be human.” What Florence proposes is a turn away from “the old binaries,” in order to embrace a more holistic, perhaps a more empathetic, philosophy of being. As she suggests, stepping back from these familiar dualisms can start by bringing cultural activities, like art viewing or making, out of their typical settings and into green spaces. It seems simple, but the changes in my own thinking began when I started working at a studio in a park.

The year-long artist residency where I was reintroduced to the park setting was initiated and overseen by the Culture, Arts and Nature Department of the Chicago Park District. It was different from the privately funded residencies I was familiar with, mainly because it involved the larger city bureaucracy that enveloped the park system. As a result, I learned more about the history of Chicago and its parks. The fundamental relationship between the parks and the City of Chicago was something I had curiously overlooked before, despite the fact that I am a long-time Chicago resident and that many neighborhoods of Chicago are officially named after local parks. Notably, Chicago’s city crest reads *Urbs in Horto*, or City in a Garden, emphasizing that the preservation of green space, beachfront, and riverfront has been a priority since the city’s incorporation. In a nod to the city crest, the emblem of the Chicago Park District reads *Hortus in Urbe*, a chiasmus that means Garden in the City. Today, the Chicago Park District is the largest municipal park system in the nation with over 8,800 acres of green space and 600 parks.2
Ava Carney, *A Genius of the Spot II*, 2020, glazed ceramic, 29" x 12" x 14"
Ava Carney, Installation view, A Genius of the Spot II, glazed ceramic, 29” x 12” x 14”, The Garfield Park Conservatory, January 8 - March 8 2020
The Athletic Field Park Ceramic Studio is one of many city-funded arts and crafts studios administered by the Park District, and it was here that I began my residency in the summer of 2018. This park is in the northwest-side Irving Park neighborhood, close to where I grew up. For me it contained all the familiar touchstones of a city park: baseball diamonds, tennis courts, a playground. The two buildings on the property, a ceramic studio and large recreational field house, were both built in the early 1900s. The long, single story building that now holds the ceramic studio was converted from public showers to a china painting studio with funds from a Works Progress Administration grant during the 1940s as part of a nationwide craft revival effort. Since its conversion, the studio has kept the same spirit of equity and accessibility, hosting hundreds of students from the community each season and since 2018, an annual artist-in-residence.

The studio in the park was quite different from all my previous workspaces. It was more attuned to the park’s active outdoor atmosphere and felt more permeable to the seasons. With classes hosted in the small building each day, the layout of the space and placement of tools, materials, and new works were constantly in flux. The people I met and ongoing changes in the studio became new and unpredictable influences. As more stories were shared and my perspective of the city evolved, it became difficult to envision how a final exhibition might come together. Although there were many locations in the Park District that could accommodate artworks, each had such a different atmosphere and history. I could not picture making new work before finding and understanding the place where it would be situated.

Park District staff and I discussed various spaces for the residency’s final exhibition, and someone suggested that the early twentieth century botanic garden on Chicago’s West Side, the Garfield Park Conservatory, could be a possible site for the show. This idea harmonized with many recent studio experiences: the permeable boundary between art and nature, the equity of public space, and the richness of community. The possibility offered so much to discover, I pursued it further. After several visits to the space, my ideas began to adjust to the complexity of the gardens and the Conservatory’s mission, which “envisions a world where people embrace and honor the importance of nature.”

Several months later, my exhibition, A Genius of the Spot, opened in the Jens Jensen Fern Room of the Conservatory. The title references a sentiment from artist Lorado Taft, whose figurative sculptures are displayed in the Conservatory’s entrance to the Fern Room: “I wish that every small park and playground might have its fit sculptural adornment—a kindly genius of the spot, as it were. Such an image would stand in memory for the place and pleasure it has given.”

Penny Florence asks, “What happens when you give equal weight to the main elements of landscape, planting and artwork?” I had asked myself some version of the question when I started envisioning pieces for the conservatory. The process was difficult; the incorporation of artwork into such an abundant site presented new challenges. I wondered how the work could exist with the landscape, which would have such a determining influence “on installed works in ways that are rarely considered when the art is foregrounded at the expense of everything else,” as works typically are in a museum or gallery. There was the unique presence of the many ferns, moving water, fish, turtles, changes in light and temperature, and the brilliance of Jensen’s innovative landscape design. The garden was tranquil, mysterious, archaic. I wanted to capture figures with a similar affect.

In the making, I looked to the lyrical gestures in classical statutory and traditional garden ornaments—especially the cherub—as well as the enigmatic and stoic features of more ancient figures. The work of contemporary artist Ana Maria Pacheco was also influential. Her visceral wooden sculptures depict humans with pointed teeth, an exaggeration she says underscores the fact that we are predators. Perhaps the Genius of the Spot figures offer a portrait of the other half: the human defanged, as garden creature—an herbivore.

By design, art for the public garden leads back to the idea of ecological citizenship because of its ability to articulate a “further reaching philosophy” that gives us a critical perspective on our behaviors and thought systems. A sculpture placed in a garden begins to do the work of challenging some of the humanist dualisms that position art as separate from life and culture as divorced from nature. It shifts our focus away from those binaries, instead becoming a place where art, conservation, design, architecture, science, education, leisure, and play can come together. It offers the possibility of appreciating the
Ava Carney, Installation view, A Genius of the Spot V, glazed ceramic, 31” x 9” x 10”, The Garfield Park Conservatory, January 8 - March 8 2020
nuance of difference and gives us a place where we can reclaim our roles as creators instead of consumers. Art and nature, especially when paired, make room for a silence that gives us some distance from the material. Maybe out of these quiet moments we will see that space is never really empty. We need less than we think.

Ava Carney is a mixed media artist based in Chicago. She has pursued her work as a resident artist at the Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts in Newcastle, Maine, the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, France, and the Chicago Park District. She has worked as a teaching artist at the Hyde Park Art Center and the Athletic Field Park Ceramic Studio, and she currently develops youth arts programming for the Chicago Public Libraries as a library associate in Teen Services at Harold Washington Library. For more information visit https://www.carneyava.com/

NOTES
5. Florence, Thinking the Sculpture Garden, i.
6. Ibid., 12.
Silence

JAMES BALLOWE

We silence silence with unmuffled noise,
cacophonous voices empty of thought,
discordant music flailing all our senses.

If silence were perfect, we would know
the Earth’s hum, the OM of the universe.
In silence we would hear ourselves thinking.

Absent silence, nature’s voice is diminished,
pines stilled, bird song lost.

In silence, Beethoven heard a C sharp Minor chord
and gave us his near perfect Fourteenth String Quartet.

Silence is the final note of Picasso’s The Old Guitarist.
He contemplates his instrument and hears pure sound,
the peace of a life well lived, one last note plucked
from the now silent strings that have lived as long as he.

James Ballowe is Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Bradley University. Since retiring from university teaching and administration, Jim has written a biography of Joy Morton and a monograph history of The Morton Arboretum. For many years he taught natural history writing and environmental ethics at the Morton Arboretum.
Recovering Indigeneity: A Conversation about Food, Health, and Wellbeing with Akilah Martin and Orrin Williams

JEREMY OHMES

This past winter, on a frost-bitten February day, I met Akilah Martin and Orrin Williams at Kusanya Café in the heart of Englewood on the South Side of Chicago. Warmth enveloped us as we walked into the coffee shop—the kind of warmth that comes from a space of community and belonging. We met there to discuss ideas around local food and health care access, environmental and social justice, and ecological citizenship. These issues are near and dear to both Akilah and Orrin as they work with communities to reclaim food and health and to unravel entrenched systems of violence, racism, and injustice.

As a soil scientist, Akilah connects people every day to the dirt under their feet. Her work around soil and water quality, especially in relation to life expectancy and health inequities, empowers citizens to better understand how much their food, wellness, and well-being depends on healthy soil. For Orrin, his work in gardening and local food production gets people into the dirt directly as they learn how to grow their own food with whatever resources are at their disposal. Through the Chicago Partnership for Health Promotion (CPHP) at the University of Illinois–Chicago, the Center for Urban Transformation, and the Sweet Water Foundation, Orrin helps communities to build food security and sovereignty and to recognize the role of food in addressing racial, social, and economic inequalities. Akilah
Jeremy Ohmes (JO): First, I would love to know more about the work that you are both doing in the community.

Orrin Williams (OW): Through the CPHP, we’ve developed a curriculum around container vegetable gardening, but Akilah just smashed up my brain in terms of soil. I appreciate listening to her and learning from her about the deeper levels of soil and how essential it is. I’ve kind of abstractly said it’s the most valuable thing on the planet, but that was reinforced, vigorously, after learning what I learned from her.

Akilah Martin (AM): Thank you. Yesterday, I was invited to do a guest lecture at Illinois Institute of Technology. The class was a geospatial health class that’s using GIS (Geographic Information Systems) to map the spread of disease and other health-related issues. It was really interesting to talk to the students about soil because they’re not taking soil classes. They’re looking at health, soil, and place history and how their health is related to place. It was really interesting for them to be able to do that because most people probably don’t think about place and their health. Or how the built environment or air quality or water quality really affects them.

OW: Yeah, and I’m going to say that that’s a real deficit in terms of our kind of day-to-day assessment. It’s kind of related to this consistent bombardment with what I call socialization material, right? Whether it’s TV or YouTube, what you read, what you listen to, there’s this whole sort of PR, psychotic infrastructure that just keeps at you, right? And so you’re not concerned about those things because you’re so busy. I mean, we’re sitting right here in a community [Englewood] where the life expectancy is sixty years old versus in more affluent communities not far from us in Chicago.

JO: How do you make people aware of and get them concerned about the inequities within our food systems? These systems are so entrenched with so many structural obstacles. What are some of the challenges and opportunities you see for people to reclaim their own health and their own food and be more connected with the land and the soil?

AM: A lot of it is cognitive dissonance. If we’re going to continue with an unhealthy lifestyle, we know what the outcome will be. And some people even challenge you, like, I’m not going to do that, I’m going to keep eating unhealthy food, even though they know that it’s impacting them. That’s the part that keeps me in this space of cluelessness for these attitudes and behaviors. How do I gently bring them over to eating good food without creating a sense of hopelessness or grief?

If you’re distracted all the time, how much mental space do you have left to think about how you as an individual can make new choices? When you are bombarded all day long with eat this, drink that. Your family may also be having a lot of challenges happening. So how do you find the time to focus on you? I’ve been struggling a long time trying to figure out how to bring people along. I mean, we’ve been in front of lots of different people, lots of different age groups. And I think that what I want to do is always leave something on their mind about their eating habits, and that’s what I try to do. After that it’s really up to them to make that decision to go further. And understand how best to be a really good community member. Which is difficult because of trust issues. A lot of academics come into communities just wanting to get research done so they can continue their own work, you know? It’s not really helpful to the community, and they never even see the data. Even if they do, they probably can’t understand what the data presented in an academic analysis means for them. Who understands that?

JO: Is that where art and music and other means of expression come into practice? Where it’s not just data and numbers and top down communication, but it can become more of a practice and more hands-in-the-dirt?

OW: Yeah, but it’s also that the data thing has become more pervasive. You know we always talk about the paralysis of analysis, right? It’s becoming more profound in my mind. Especially for me having a seat in an academic institution. I’m always like, but what does the data say? How are you going to evaluate it, right? It never gets done. But the hands-in-the-dirt kind of stuff does, right?

As Akilah was saying, too, it’s the intersection between culture and art and all that. And it’s interesting you brought up “means of expression” because some of us, especially young black men, we’re often not consciously thinking, oh, let me form an expression of myself. The expression just happens through some form of entertainment—being an athlete or being a singer or a dancer, or some kind of performer. But it is still a form of self-expression. Your game is an art form. For me, it’s also about having people begin to think like, expand your art form, right? Whatever that art form is. And condition it based upon where you’re at in life.
AM: I think people are expressing themselves because they need healing and that’s the way that they see healing for themselves. Healing because of the traumatic experience that I’m sure all of us have had at some time, whether it was in the womb, or outside the womb. Trauma is real and it’s passed down genetically. And, if you live in Chicago, you’re going to experience it in some form or fashion.

And food is part of that healing process. I mean, I’ve always said that the current food system is like a terrorist attack on our people. I go on GrubHub or some other food delivery option and I look at what’s being offered to me where I live, and there’s nothing nourishing offered to me. If I’m in the South Loop, there’s a million options. And I understand, because sometimes the greasy, heart attack food is great. I’m not mad at that, but that shouldn’t be my offering all day, every day. What is the deal? Things like that really bog down my mind.

OW: Food is critical in terms of your emotional and mental health. It directly correlates to depression and anxiety; all kinds of disorders are due to poor diet, right?

If you’re distracted all the time, how much mental space do you have left to think about how you as an individual can make new choices?

JO: Food is medicine.

OW: I don’t even like that term.

JO: Why don’t you like that term?

OW: Because it medicalizes it. It should be food as well-being, or food as healing, or as normal, right? And also just looking at other food cultures, sometimes I get stuck in YouTube, and I watch how people eat in Samoa. I see how people eat in Suriname. And I can see how when that food system gets disrupted, what happens to people. How the food industry has interrupted their native culture.

AM: It’s part of a game, to do that. And then to continue to do that across the globe. It’s unfortunate.

OW: And then we keep hearing about this upsurge of mental disorders or behavioral disorders or whatever the case may be. I remember when everyone used to get food stamps the first of the month and I would go into grocery stores, and I’d wander around all day, just watching the people in line.

AM: Well, you know on the first of the month, the grocery stores put everything sugar-related on sale. I don’t know if you’ve ever noticed that.

OW: No, I did not.

AM: All the processed foods are on sale. You can get all the pop you want, all the cereal you want. I’ve looked at it. Just watch the sale papers when they know people are going to get their check.

OW: That also explains what I observed. People would go up to the register, they’d spend $300.

AM: On nothing.

OW: And then you look at what students tell me in the classrooms, about people on the street. We’ve said for a long time we wish we could go into a police station or county jail, and when they bring somebody in, we ask them what they’ve eaten in the last week, the last two days, the last three days, today. Right? Probably would scare the hell out of us.

AM: It’s disheartening. If you think about how we’re suffering, this is not food that our bodies are used to, or want, or can digest, and so we’re being forced to eat things that are less healthy for us. I can’t imagine what that’s going to do to people in other countries who are not able to eat the food that they’ve been eating for generations, that is native to their climate, to their soil. But now you’re saying I’ve got to eat this because this is cheaper, because, well, people are always going to go for the cheaper version, why not? But certainly, if you knew the effects of that food, maybe you won’t go for the cheaper.

JO: It feels like our stomachs are being colonized. And there’s not too much native or indigenous food in this region that we have access to regularly. It seems like there’s a lot of impediments to eating right.

OW: My whole thing is about being radical. I want to grow as much food as I can year round. We’ve talked to landscape architects and all these different folks about how people can build a greenhouse in the back of their house or a garden box that’s easy to construct, right? And we know that Sweet Water Foundation and different places plant green leafy vegetables in the spring and April and then it snows twice. And those greens are actually the best-tasting ones that you get—not the ones from the seedlings that were there in the basement. And now, even tomatoes are coming up because they went to seed. We figure we just need to buy some starts, and then you just let it seed. Just from the fruit that fell. And you go, like, wait a minute, that’s how the system works anyway.
A CONVERSATION ABOUT FOOD, HEALTH, AND WELLBEING WITH AKILAH MARTIN AND ORRIN WILLIAMS 75

The current food system is like a terrorist attack on our people…. sometimes the greasy, heart attack food is great. I’m not mad at that, but that shouldn’t be my offering all day, every day. What is the deal? Things like that really bog down my mind.

AM: That’s how it works.

JO: Like whenever I check my compost, there’s always tomato plants growing up out of it.

OW: Exactly.

AM: That’s Earth. She knows what to do.

OW: Because that’s just how vibrant and vital the Earth is. It’s like, so why not our back yards? Take fruit trees. Could we fill vacant lots or parkways with fruit trees? We’ve got to have the Akilahs of the world because if I plant a fruit tree in urban soil, I need to know if it’s going to uptake metals and chemicals. But if it doesn’t uptake those toxins into the fruit, there’s a community food source?

AM: True.

OW: But everybody’s colonized, right? Because 90 percent of the food that comes into Chicago is imported. And what do we export? Corn and soy, most of it not even for human consumption with 99 percent of millions of acres in production for feed, but not food. It’s all circular.

AM: It is. I think we should reimagine what food looks like. Reimagine what the space looks like. We’re conditioned to go to the store, to go to someone else instead of going to ourselves. And that’s going to be part of a reconnection or a connection with the Earth, with the land. And understanding that soil is a living, breathing entity, and its organisms have just as much right to be here as you do. Not to be trampled on and stomped, thrown away. And that’s going to be hard for a lot of people to see soil as something that’s living and that’s connected to them. And my message is to always show people just how much soil is connected to our daily lives, whether you see it or not.

OW: I think we generally don’t know that we’re connected to this whole microbial zone that’s in the soil and out of the soil. It’s on you; it’s in your gut.

AM: All of that. And that’s what connects us around the globe. So one thing happens here and it has ripple effects somewhere else. I don’t know if people can see that or want to see that because sometimes it can be chaotic, and sometimes it can be great, who knows? If you think about this virus, that is the basic visual of how global we are, and how connected we are, and how one thing can stop everything. And food looks like that as well. It’s slower and it doesn’t have as much attention. But it connects all of us. And when are food systems are broken, then people suffer—from diabetes, heart attacks, stroke—especially poor people of color.

OW: And a lot of trauma, too. And then exacerbated by an ineffective sick care system... I’m sorry, I mean healthcare system.

AM: It is sick care.

The current food system is like a terrorist attack on our people…. sometimes the greasy, heart attack food is great. I’m not mad at that, but that shouldn’t be my offering all day, every day. What is the deal? Things like that really bog down my mind.

OW: It is. I participate in some focus groups and having just general conversation with folks in the community and they say, I don’t want to go to the doctor.

AM: Nope.

OW: I don’t even want to know if I’ve got something. And if I do go, then how am I going to get all the treatments I need to get? I don’t trust that system.

AM: I’m probably one of those people.

OW: I think that’s normal, actually. So you can know about food and nutrition and all that, but even if you want to eat healthy and live healthy, how do you make that happen?

JO: It’s so daunting and our system has done a good job of individualizing us and making us feel alone. But, like you say, we are so interconnected, and how can we come together to not feel so alone and to empower one another? It seems like a lot of this comes down to a sense of community and a sense of belonging. How can we create a sense of belonging to help each other come back to these issues?

OW: I think it’s rooted in the definition of the word community. It’s in the ecology dictionary. We use it as a sociological term, in the main, right? Which is part of the language of disconnection. But when you think of ecology and you think of the desert, the pond, the lake, the ocean, the rainforest, the high mountains, the forest. All of these different niches and biomes, right? How can a community be healthy if its nutrient flows aren’t healthy? And that’s not just food and that’s not just water. It’s the air quality. It’s the quality of the soil. It’s a
relationship between soil and lifespan. If you don’t connect to that because you don’t even see yourself as part of the biome, as part of the ecosystem, then...

JO: It’s that reductionism again.

Our system has done a good job of individualizing us and making us feel alone. But, like you say, we are so interconnected, and how can we come together to not feel so alone and to empower one another?

OW: Exactly. And it’s reinforced by all kinds of stuff, right? Or hidden by all kinds of stuff. What you hear, what you see, what you eat—all of that keeps you from community. We’ve got all these different people from all these different places, and you separate us and you make us scared of each other, right? Instead of allowing us to learn from each other. Oh, what kind of bean is that? What kind of cabbage is that? What kind of food is that? I think that is one of our strengths, and we’re not even coming together around that, around food and growing. I’m just tired of the whole narrative around food, and around us as consumers. How come we can’t be productive consumers? How come even if I’m not interested in growing my own food, I can’t give a part of my backyard or side yard or whatever to the local folk who can go in and cultivate it? All these abandoned buildings—let people live there. Clean them up. That impacts me psychologically, as much as screwed-up food does.

AM: Right. And we have to remove the idea of currency and money in community, so that people don’t have to have that focus. The focus is on the community, and how I contribute to that community, and not how much money I can spend or the need to have this luxurious item.

OW: It’s all about recovering your indigeneity. That recognition now that indigenous nature can really be applied universally, and we can come together around the essence of that. Communitarianism, communual, whatever word you want to use, right? I don’t even like using any of those terms because they all get bogged down. Just like I don’t use the word God a lot.

AM: I just say “The Universe.”

OW: I have an acronym I use. It’s ISP.

JO: ISP?
Alejandro Frid is an ecologist for First Nations of British Columbia’s Central Coast as well as a professor at the University of Victoria. He works collaboratively with First Nations on the integration of traditional knowledge and Western science to advance conservation and revitalize Indigenous control of their resources. Alejandro is also my neighbor in a small island community in Southern British Columbia, not far from Vancouver. The waters that surround us have seen a remarkable recovery in the past decade following the shutdown of polluting industrial projects and the efforts of concerned citizens and citizen scientists. Good days at the beach involve orca sightings. The region has also witnessed the resurgence of the Squamish nation and its culture. Members of this community are learning the old names for this place: Atl’kitsem (Howe Sound) and Negwleexm (Bowen Island).

At the time of our interview, railroads and highways across Canada were being blocked in support of the Wet’suwet’en hereditary chiefs in northern British Columbia, who refused to allow oil and gas workers onto their traditional territory. With
Canada’s national police force making arrests and circling overhead in helicopters, the headlines were bringing the complexity of colonialism and its legal structures into view for the wider public.

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**Meribeth Deen (MD):** Your central ask of readers is that we work to re-interpret our view of humanity, to move away from the “convenient ideology” that humans are a destructive geologic force, and that we shift toward an Indigenous worldview that sees humans and the rest of the living world as inseparable. What does this shift look like, when taken into the public realm?

**Alejandro Frid (AF):** Well, on a fundamental level, it’s about accepting that we have responsibilities to each other and to other living things. I like the notion that other animals are our relatives—and that goes beyond evolution and genetics. From an Indigenous perspective, plants and animals are relatives in the sense that they sustain us, and we owe them reciprocal behavior. And there are so many ways that this can pervade governance. Also, it means standing up against the ideology of separation in whatever way we can. For some people, it’s putting themselves on the front lines and, in many cases, risking their lives quite seriously. For others, it may mean working as lawyers. For others, it’s phoning politicians. It is about doing something.

**MD:** I love the way you describe yourself as a descendant of wandering ancestors. Of course, that’s the antithesis of being Indigenous. You advocate that people like us, who are a majority of the world’s population, need to become naturalized citizens pledging to uphold the laws of the part of the world where they live. What would that look like in British Columbia, where you and I live?

**AF:** Well, where we live, it’s actually getting increasingly more straightforward because you have this revitalization of Indigenous governance happening, in which the role of hereditary chiefs is coming to the forefront. They are responsible for when, where, how, and who gathers resources in their chiefdom, and their authority is contingent on the chief maintaining knowledge of those resources and their sustainable management. If they are in fact working within their traditions, they are enacting their responsibilities toward their territories. This means they are protecting all of their non-human kin. There are many ways for those of us who live in this world to support that.

**MD:** But you talk about the fact there is a whole place-based Indigenous legal structure. Beyond just giving power to those people who understand those systems and are connected to that kind of knowledge, is it is it our job to try and learn what those laws are?

**AF:** Absolutely. First of all, it is about just having the self-awareness to know where we come from as individuals and understanding that although we are not Indigenous, we are not invalid in terms of being here. I mean, history has happened. We’re not going to undo history, and every Indigenous person that I work with gets that. They’re not asking us to leave and go back to Europe. They’re basically saying, “Okay, you’re here, but if we’re really going to be on this land together, you have to learn our history, and how it affects our present, and how we can work together toward the future.” We need to acknowledge that there was already a longstanding civilization with a very developed legal system at the time of colonization. We need to understand the fundamentals of that legal system. I mean, right now the media is creating a situation that is confusing to many people—we hear about elected chiefs being somehow more legitimate because they have been voted in, but the system of elected chiefs was created and continues to be maintained by the colonial government. Under this system, their role is mainly to administrate what happens on reserves. Hereditary chiefdoms are passed through generations, and they are responsible for the traditional territories that often extend well beyond the reserves. Ideally, hereditary chiefs and elected ones work together. In any case, out of the confusion I think there are some people who have worked to understand what is going on and see things more clearly than before.

**MD:** What about ecological literacy, how do you see that fitting into this re-education?

**AF:** Well, it’s huge. If people really understood the consequences of their actions in terms of what it does to the climate and forests and so on, I think they might think a lot more carefully about their choices. But that’s only part of it. The other part of ecological literacy is that the more you know about ecosystems, the more you truly connect with them. With that connection you know, the more you get invested in protecting them because you know how truly amazing they are. If you understand the joy of being out on the land, you’re more likely to rise and act on behalf of it.

**MD:** Right. I think a lot of us wish we could offer a deeper ecological literacy for our kids, but we don’t necessarily have the tools ourselves.
**AF:** Yeah, and that’s the barrier that we should be working to break down because we seem to be connecting kids to nature through YouTube, and they learn about the Amazon and other far-off places. This is kind of cool, but it makes nature abstract. They need to be able to go out the door and find trees and frogs and feel the excitement of that so they can grow to care for the place where they live.

**MD:** When I think about my own relationship with nature, it happens a lot in the garden, but as I was reading your book I started to wonder whether the garden is another reflection of my engrained colonial mentality—which you say thrives of simplicity. Sure, I plant a variety of things, but they are not necessarily native species.

**AF:** It is not necessarily colonialism, and it is definitely possible to create gardens that promote biodiversity. And Robin Wall Kimmerer’s book *Braiding Sweetgrass* really shows how traditional cultures modified landscapes quite intentionally—and it actually promoted diversity rather than suppressed it. To me, it is a really important part of understanding the alternative interpretation of what humans can be.

**MD:** What role do you see technology playing in advancing humans in contributing to biodiversity and the rest of the living world, as opposed to destroying it?

**AF:** When you look at some of the very culturally significant species for coastal First Nations that have faced decline, a contributing factor is bycatch—unintended catch by fishers while they are aiming for a specific species. Some studies in the shrimp fisheries show that by using LED lights on the netting of the shrimp vessels, the bycatch drops dramatically without affecting the targeted catch of shrimp. So that’s one way in which technology can help. Also, one of the things we’re working on is making use of a traditional halibut hook that has been proven to raise the amount of halibut caught, but not other species. We are now looking at a program to modernize this hook and use it in the current context. It is in the early stages right now, but once we test out the results, we could see this kind of technology being revitalized.

**MD:** Do you think the use of terms like “land defender” and “water defender” shifts the way we are thinking about humanity?

**AF:** I think it’s potentially very exciting because it really is a resurgence and then an adaptation of these traditions in which you have a responsibility to the land. Most of our political leaders have a responsibility toward corporations, and this language is the antithesis of that. It is rooted in Indigenous traditions, and here we are seeing it play out on the bridges of Vancouver, across the country, even at the United Nations.

**MD:** Do you see a name for those people who are supporting those Indigenous land defenders, something that goes beyond environmental or climate activist?

**AF:** I see where you’re going with this, but I find labels can be pretty unsatisfying. For me, Robin Wall Kimmerer’s idea of being a *naturalized citizen* is key. This goes well beyond co-existence and moves into the territory of reciprocity. Because we live in the same place, we need to do what we can to help the other thrive, and a big part of that is managing human relationships so that they don’t diminish the integrity of ecosystems. And I think the beauty in this kind of citizenship is that it is about looking for the greater good or the common good. And as soon as you start to look at the world through that lens, you also start to look at the rest of the living world as something other than a natural resource.

Meribeth Deen is a recovering journalist enjoying life in the temperate rainforest of the Pacific Northwest. She’s worked for various public broadcasters, production companies and publications. While her energies are currently focused on local initiatives, Meribeth continues to write on her own website (meribethdeen.com) and for her community’s newspaper. Her best work can be found jumping on the trampoline and growing in the garden.

Alejandro Frid, PhD, is an ecologist for First Nations of British Columbia’s Central Coast, and adjunct assistant professor in the School of Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria. He works collaboratively with First Nations on the integration of traditional knowledge and Western science to advance conservation and revitalize Indigenous control of their resources. Author of *A World for My Daughter: An Ecologist’s Search for Optimism* (Caitlin Press, 2015) and *Changing Tides: An Ecologist’s Journey to Make Peace with the Anthropocene* (New Society Publishers, 2019), he can be found at alejandrofridecology.weebly.com.

“Whatever we do to the land, which is our source of life, we do to ourselves.... Kinship and guardianship are necessary for our very survival” (253), concludes Melissa Nelson at the end of the comprehensive and interdisciplinary volume, *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability*, co-edited with Dan Shilling. The book’s themes about the importance of connection to local land in a visceral, cultural, linguistic, and familial way offer both a call for the Western world to heed the important knowledge held by Indigenous communities—an important framework for the type of environmental sustainability that serves entities other than just humans—and an insistence that this knowledge must be approached respectfully.

Overall, I would highly recommend this book to a wide range of readers. Its accessible writing will make it useful and interesting not only to specialized scholars in the fields of sustainability, environmental, and Native American studies, but also to students and community-based readers (at least, those of them who can afford the $100 price tag). I have already recommended particular chapters to students, farmers, food producers, and Indigenous thinkers. I would encourage every library to buy this book.

The book is comprised of fourteen chapters by eighteen contributors from a variety of intellectual backgrounds. There are selections from the ecologists, environmental scientists, and business professors that one might expect to be publishing about sustainability, but also from philosophers, poets, and Native American studies professors. A majority of the contributors are Indigenous, and over half are women—the book touches on the corresponding oppression of nature, women, and Indigenous peoples associated with settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism (see Chapter Seven, by Joan McGregor).

The interdisciplinarity of the assembled authors is reflective of the Native Science described within. Pueblo Native American studies professor Greg Cajete describes Native Science as including not only traditional ecological practices but also categories such as metaphysics and philosophy; art and architecture; practical sustainable technologies and agriculture; and ritual and ceremony practiced by Indigenous people both past and present. Native Science encompasses areas that would fall under conventional scientific categories such as astronomy, plant domestication, plant medicine, animal husbandry, geology, and an array of other studies related to plants, animals, and natural phenomena, but also extends beyond those areas to include spirituality, community, creativity, linguistic explorations, “the nature of human knowing and feeling; the nature of proper human relationship to the cosmos; and other such questions related to natural reality” (16–17).

One of the things that many of the authors of this book call for is a similarly interdisciplinary approach to the current climate crisis. Potawatomi biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer insists that “what we need is not the intellectual monoculture of scientism but an intellectual pluralism. A polyculture of ideas is especially
important at this critical time as we search for strategies of resilience in the face of accelerating ecological and cultural shifts of unprecedented magnitude" (47). Based on the model of the “three sisters” garden—which entails the polycropping of corn, beans, and squash for the mutual benefit of the plants to each other and as a complimentary diet for humans—Kimmerer calls on us to develop a scientific mutualism in which “the climbing ‘beans’ of scientific inquiry are guided by the ‘maize’ of Indigenous principles,” with the squash representing “the educational climate of mutual respect, intellectual pluralism, and critical thinking in which both TEK [traditional ecological knowledge] and SEK [scientific ecological knowledge] can grow” (51-52).

...reinvigorating cultures of reciprocity provides our only sustainable way forward. The well-being of humans, plants, and animals are linked, and for the mutual thriving and survival of all parties we need to restore cultural services as well as ecosystem services.

One of the main themes of the book, as outlined by co-editor Dan Shilling in the introduction, is that “sustainability is foremost a moral, not technological, undertaking, beginning with how our species relates to its surroundings” (4). As O’odham/Chicano/Anglo restoration ecologist Dennis Martinez describes in Chapter Nine, when operating under neoliberal capitalism, the framing of solutions to sustainability problems involves the very economic forces and belief systems that caused the problems in the first place. He sees the dominant economic model as “ethically incompetent” (158). What is instead needed, write environmental ethics professor Michael Paul Nelson and animal ecologist John Vucetich in Chapter Eight, is a non-anthropocentric moral system—an inclusive environmental ethics that allows for the attribution of intrinsic value or direct moral standing to the more-than-human world. And since “there’s a perceived lack of ability within Western culture to extend direct moral standing to the nonhuman world” (131), this book lays out how Indigenous communities across the world (with a primary focus on North America) have co-existed with their environments through an ethos of reciprocity, respect, and gratitude.

The term reciprocity was mentioned in nearly every essay. Syilx Okanagan literary scholar Jeannette Armstrong writes that “ethical conduct within nature is based in reciprocity” (98). Kimmerer (in Chapter Three) describes this reciprocity as coupling “taking” from the planet (i.e., extracting “natural resources”) with the moral responsibility of “giving back in equal measure,” something she sees as a missing link from Western economic models. Martinez (in Chapter Nine) describes this reciprocal relationship as “kincentricity”—Indigenous land care practices that entail reciprocal relationships laid out in “original compacts” between animals and humans; a way of life that includes relating respectfully to all life as kin and to the Earth as a nurturing mother. There are no “natural resources” when those beings are your kin who must be approached with respect before harvesting. Kimmerer describes this as the “Honorable Harvest,” a “practical reverence” that has both spiritual and material dimensions. She calls on us to recognize that “we inhabit a landscape of gifts peopled by nonhuman relatives, the sovereign beings who sustain us” (27).

So how does one respond to a world made of gifts? In her essay on Indigenous food sovereignty in Canada (Chapter Ten), Cree Native studies professor Priscilla Settee points out the major contributions that Indigenous peoples’ TEK has historically played in creating global food security through the development of crops like corn, potatoes, and tomatoes—gifts to the world often not recognized. Throughout the book, contributors insist that reinvigorating cultures of reciprocity provides our only sustainable way
forward. The well-being of humans, plants, and animals are linked, and for the mutual thriving and survival of all parties we need to restore cultural services as well as ecosystem services, as Kimermer describes. This idea of reciprocal restoration, “the expansion of restoration goals to include the mutualistic role of humans as active participants in land healing through cultural practices” (41), leads to a repair of ecosystem services, as well as cultural revitalization. Kimermer gives the example of her research on sweetgrass plots, which found that beds that were respectfully harvested using the methods employed by traditional basket makers demonstrated more robust growth than beds that were left untouched. As Martinez describes, “most activists supporting the conservation of ‘wilderness’ without people have little knowledge of Indigenous cultural land care practices or environmental history” (145). Kimermer’s work, on the other hand, as well as that of others in this volume, has quantitatively and qualitatively demonstrated that the ethos of the honorable harvest is mutually beneficial.

The need to restore and revitalize these types of practices and ethics rang throughout the book; as Cajete notes in Chapter Two, “the revitalization of Native Science is an essential component of cultural revitalization and preservation” (17). Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz, in his essay on the role of land as the originator of language and culture, concludes that TEK matters because it is the foundation for Indigenous wholeness and provides pragmatic tools for resiliency responding to environmental change. This Indigenous knowledge is needed not just to save the world from environmental destruction after centuries of extraction and abuse, but its revitalization is also important for the health, thriving, and continued existence of the Native communities who developed it.

Along these lines, some of these essays are adamant (and to some extent unapologetic) about who this information should be for and to what end. TEK is not just for contributing to the broader goals of science and knowledge production; this information is by and for Indigenous people and should be protected as such. In Chapter Four, Potawatomi environmental philosopher Kyle Whyte describes how often scientists appreciate the “supplemental value” of Indigenous knowledges—adding data that scientific methods do not normally track. But Whyte argues that Indigenous knowledges also have governance value and serve as crucial sources of guidance for Indigenous resurgence and nation building. Indigenous knowledge guides how Indigenous peoples will prepare for, adapt to, and mitigate further sustainability challenges. Resurgence in this case entails striving to “recover our former selves and push toward creating better future selves reclaiming Native values” (68). The ability of Indigenous communities to flourish is contingent on Indigenous collective continuance—their capacity to adapt in ways sufficient for their members’ livelihoods to flourish in the future. This collective continuance entails adapting to the impacts of settler colonialism—including climate change—by adopting emerging means, strategies, and other planning tools and utilizing them within a framework of collective self-determination. Whyte is adamant that Indigenous knowledge is not just about the past but is relevant for the future: “Indigenous knowledges are not backward-looking repositories of information that are about historic or waning ways of life. Instead, they have a special value in Indigenous planning efforts that is different from the supplemental value of Indigenous knowledges for scientists” (70).

For these reasons, the primary value of Indigenous knowledge, as Whyte describes, is “tied to the well-being of current and future Indigenous persons, families, communities, and nations. Sometimes Indigenous well-being conflicts with scientific aspirations to add to the public domain of global scientific knowledge” (75-76). This brings us to issues of knowledge sovereignty. Indigenous knowledge is often considered too old to protect or part of the public domain because it is not written down. Indigenous nations also face challenges in sharing their TEK with the U.S. federal government to protect the environment because of concerns that this information could then be accessed through a FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) request. Tribes don’t want sensitive locations containing sacred
sites or food sources widely known for outsiders to plunder. As Yaqui legal scholar Rebecca Tsosie describes in Chapter Thirteen, “Indigenous knowledge is cultural property to be protected according to the norms of each Indigenous culture.... The Indigenous nation in the exercise of its right to self-determination should be recognized as having ownership of its traditional knowledge, along with the ability to exclude others from access and to gain damages for misuse of the traditional knowledge” (246). A theme that arose in Tsosie’s, Whyte’s, and Settee’s chapters is the need for Indigenous people to be asked to give free, prior, and informed consent before outsiders use their knowledge.

In opposition to the “ethnically incompetent” economy described at the beginning of this review, toward the end of the book, Maori business scholars Rachel Wolfram, Chellie Spiller, Carla Houkamau, and Manuka Henare define economy in its true etymological sense—the management of home as a physical space where home is defined as identity, community, a journey of social transformation, and a space for navigating futures. They argue that “the Maori economy is embedded in a holistic relational system where the natural, social, and spiritual worlds are interrelated, and the well-being of the individual is central to the well-being of the collective” (224). It is this type of economy and relationship with the environment that we need to collectively move towards, and quickly. Chickasaw literary scholar Linda Hogan wears her broken heart openly as she surveys the current condition of the world in her chapter reflecting on animals she has loved—some of whom have suffered terribly at the hands of humans. She worries, “Our knowledge isn’t expansive enough to take us to the sustainable world we so desire in this sacred place, where we once knew the means to keep this planet healthy. We have let our world down” (204). She insists we need new forms of energy and a new kind of education to pull out of this.

The book opens and closes with the acknowledgment that sustainability has become a prevalent buzzword. As Shilling notes in his introduction, critics have developed the label “sustainababble” to allude to the way in which the word has been stretched thin to the point of meaninglessness, as thousands of NGOs and other groups take on sustainability as their missions and the word is taken up by books, cities, college courses, and even as a way to rebrand the wasteful image of industries like tourism. As Shilling notes in the introduction, “Sustainability now touches nearly every academic discipline, social issue, political agenda, and professional sector... sustainability is big business” (7). In the conclusion, Anishinaabe American Indian Studies professor Melissa Nelson concludes that not only has “greenwashing” become a problem, but “red-washing” has as well, as TEK is used in superficial ways to satisfy diversity requirements. She calls on us to be wary of the intellectual habit of objectification, where TEK or Indigenous knowledge may be “reified, fragmented, and commodified for external exploitation” (258).

This book is not a guide for how to stick a feather or a medicine wheel on your sustainability plan. Instead, this book will help readers think through how general principles common across TEK (reciprocity, gratitude, responsibility, consideration for future generations) can be better taken up by the rest of the world, as long as Indigenous people are approached respectfully in the process. Nelson concludes with a call to action: “If sustainability is to mean anything relevant for us, our more-than-human relatives, and future generations, then we must put our environmental ethics into action and get back in our tracks by re-rooting to specific landscapes. If we are able to embody kindship with our natural world and practice reciprocity as if the future mattered, then we may once again become keepers of the green world” (265).

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REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS

THE SENSE OF HOME

Meribeth Deen


Throughout my reading of Changing Tides: An Ecologist’s Journey to Make Peace with the Anthropocene, I found myself distracted by updates and conversations on social media about blockades, arrests, and ceremonial fires in northern British Columbia, then in Vancouver and across the country. A group of hereditary chiefs from the Wet’suwet’en Nation have been in court battling plans for the construction of a pipeline through their traditional territory since 2012, and this past winter, as they blocked the road into that territory, they faced militarized police, helicopters circling overhead, and bulldozers. Dozens were arrested, but those who oppose the pipeline appear undeterred. These are “land defenders.” Now that it’s 2020, this and similar terms are being used in mainstream vocabulary. It occurs to me that this linguistic acceptance represents a subtle but important shift in the standard and widely accepted story about human beings, in which we are understood to be a rapacious species that can’t help but destroy the living world. When we call someone a “land defender,” we are acknowledging that humans can be more than this. This is the shift that my neighbor, author and ecologist Alejandro Frid, hopes to promote with stories and evidence that human beings are capable not only of conserving the living world, but of enhancing it as well.

Frid works with a group of Indigenous nations on the central coast of British Columbia who have joined forces to actively manage the marine resources in their territories. One of his central learnings from this work, he writes, is that despite having had the ability to deplete critical marine resources in the area—in pre-colonial times, the human population of this area was robust, and people had access to sophisticated technologies used for hunting and fishing—the first people in this area did not do so. To be clear, Frid does not claim that pre-industrial humans lacked destructive abilities or the inclinations of modern humans. Hunter-gatherers spent centuries, he writes, wreaking havoc and causing extinctions on new continents. Eventually though, they settled down. “The land ceased to be an expanding frontier and became home, the place where we humans can find our medicines, our songs, our stories—the reasons why we humans exist at all.”

Despite the damage inflicted by the past several hundred years of colonial oppression, this sense of home is still alive among many indigenous peoples. As one hereditary chief explains: “Heiltsuk have been present in traditional territory since time began and will be present until time ends.” The implication of that belief, writes Frid, is a “cascade of commitments and responsibilities.”

Frid points to traditional stories to demonstrate how the principles of restraint, responsibility, and respect of other species operated in both spiritual and social realms. These values also translate into reciprocity, which goes beyond conservation and “stands out for its tangible marks on the landscape in the form of tended landscapes that enhance wild species, allowing them to thrive in ways that are completely unlike industrial agriculture and its objective of homogenizing the landscape into a few domesticated crops.”
In rock walls built at the intertidal zones to increase the productivity of clams, in patches of shoreline modified to boost the productivity of root and berry plants, we see evidence of reciprocity. We humans are capable not only of restraining ourselves, but also of nurturing the living world. In return, it nurtures us.

The colonial mindset, writes Frid, thrived on the simplification of the world. The result was the severe diminishment of native species and the suppression of any culture that stood in the way of the land “over which they believe they have been granted divine authority. The consistent outcome has been a suppression of world views about how humans might interact with all other living things, a narrowing of the collective psyche.”

Frid sees the story of industrial fisheries on the west coast as a reflection of that collective psyche. These fishers, he writes, “have a track record of targeting the best and easiest pickings first—whatever is closest, shallowest and has the best market price—until the near annihilation of a resource forces them to go farther and deeper in pursuit of other species that might yield a lower financial profit.”

Between 1970 and 1990, commercial fishing fleets removed more than 90 percent of rockfish biomass along the BC coast (less than 1 percent of the documented history of indigenous fisheries for rockfish). This decimation, however, pales in comparison to what happened to the herring. Between 1954 and 1967, industrial fishers removed an estimated two-thirds of herring biomass every year.

And all those fish were caught to be processed into fish meal and oil, meaning that the overexploitation of an ecologically significant species that is also a cultural keystone occurred not to feed people directly but, rather, to produce fertilizers and animal feed—key ingredients for industrial agriculture that exacerbate climate change and other global problems.

While Frid acknowledges that a lack of good data on fish populations may have played a role in this devastation, he states his belief that there was—and remains—a more significant force at play than mere data. “The declines of herring and other culturally significant species is rooted in racism,” he writes.

The story of Indigenous leaders on the central coast of British Columbia fighting to protect the health of local crab populations is enough to make a reader think he just might be right. Traditional laws of the Wuikinuxv, Kitasoo/Xai’xais, Nuxalk, and Heiltsuk people dictated that if fishers caught a male crab that was large enough to have reproduced for several years, it could be harvested. Harvesters were also expected to make qualitative observations about the health of local crab populations:

They would also watch other crabs walking along the bottom and, based on prior experience of the place, assess whether local crab numbers were going up or down, or were stable. Then they would think about relatives back home. Who has not had crab for a while and could use some? How many do I need for my own household? Do I have enough for the next potlatch? All these pieces of information would then determine whether the harvesters would haul the hoop trap with crab or empty, and whether they would reset it.

During the 1990s, the levels of commercial crab fishing increased in and around the traditional territories of the Wuikinuxv, Kitasoo/Xai’xais, Nuxalk, and Heiltsuk. The commercial fisheries managers (from the Department Fisheries and Oceans, or DFO) were allowing only the harvest of large males. They had no data to back them up, but they assumed that if females and smaller males were not harvested, then reproductive rates would remain adequate. For a decade they ignored contradictory evidence brought to them by local Indigenous leadership.

The three neighboring communities started working together to ask for the closure of the commercial fishery in traditional areas. Frid says that by the time he started working with them in 2013, the relationship with the DFO had become combative. “Prove that you have a problem,’ had become the tired, and vacuous, challenge from one particular crab manager.”
In 2014, community leaders, invoking legal principles that require hereditary chiefs to protect resources within their tenure areas, closed off ten areas to commercial and recreational fishers. They asked DFO crab managers to recognize those closures, writes Frid, but they refused. So, with the co-operation of commercial and recreational fishers, the communities worked with Frid to conduct a ten-month experiment that would produce data showing the impact of the commercial fishery. Frid writes that he expected the data to settle the issue, but DFO countered with a request for more data—to prove that Indigenous fishers were having problems catching enough crab to satisfy their cultural needs.

In the years following, further research set out to create quantitative data to do just that. Researchers found that until the 1990s, fishers caught an average of twenty-two crabs per trap. At the time, the interviews were being conducted, that number was closer to five crabs per trap. Perhaps it was this “proof” that people were struggling to access an important traditional food that caused the tone of conversations between community leaders and fisheries managers began to shift. Since 2017, the DFO has honored four requests by these communities to shut down commercial fisheries.

For Frid, while this story exemplifies the racist attitudes that allow over-exploitation, it also offers hope: things can change. Indigenous groups who were historically at war now work in close collaboration with one another. The Supreme Court of Canada now recognizes oral narratives as valid evidence used to reconstruct historical land relations in support of land title cases brought by indigenous nations before the court. Science and policy makers, like those at the DFO, can embrace traditional ways of knowing. If they do, it will create stronger foundations for resource management and fundamentally alter the “collective psyche of industrial civilization.”

Frid points to the system of Hereditary chiefs, who are responsible stewards of specific places, as being critically important in the Anthropocene. Their authority, he writes, is contingent on the chief maintaining knowledge of those resources and their sustainable management, transmitting that knowledge intergenerationally and redistributing his or her own wealth derived from those resources. “Staying connected to place, for the long run, is a key responsibility of the chiefs.” In his work with Indigenous communities, Frid says this system of governance is often invoked to push for the establishment of marine protected areas. While such actions can’t stop the change that comes with a warming climate, they can give certain species a better chance of survival and keep ecosystems from tipping over into a state from which they will never recover.

Most of us, like Frid, are “descendants of wandering ancestors.” We can’t be expected to understand or adopt the visceral sense of “home” felt by indigenous peoples. However, he urges that what we can do is learn, respect, and embrace the laws and ways of knowing that came before us. Based on his explanation of the system of Hereditary chiefs in this book, it seems to me that finding ways to engage with them in the co-creation of the laws we all live by seems like a critical step to becoming naturalized citizens of the lands we live on.

In Changing Tides, Frid does not offer us a way out of the Anthropocene—out of climate change and species extinction. Similarly, he does not offer us any straightforward manner of resolving the conflicts between industry and the land defenders who stand in its way. What he offers is the possibility that with a shift in perspective, we can better manage these challenges. That shift is initiated when we change the stories we tell. When we tell ourselves that humans are rabid consumers and an unstoppable geologic force, we will be so. If we tell ourselves that human nature is not fixed, and that collectively we are capable of continuous improvement, we will step up and do the work.

Meribeth Deen is a recovering journalist enjoying life in the temperate rainforest of the Pacific Northwest. She’s worked for various public broadcasters, production companies and publications. While her energies are currently focused on local initiatives, Meribeth continues to write on her own website (meribethdeen.com) and for her community’s newspaper. Her best work can be found jumping on the trampoline and growing in the garden.

Worthwhile for those interested in citizenship and the ways in which it functions in a fascistic society. Agamben’s book is useful in discussing places like Guantanamo Bay and ICE detention centers. There is also significant mention of biology and how that discipline fits into politics (biopolitics). Informs how reducing/comparing humans with non-human life can have sinister implications in political life.


This a highly influential book in fields like cultural studies. The text discusses nationalism. For Anderson, nationalism is an artifact of culture, and he investigates this historically. Reveals how media—specifically print media written in a common language—contribute to the illusion that citizens share a common national identity.

Aristotle. Politics.

A work from one of Ancient Greece’s famous philosophers. Available in many translations and editions and in the public domain. Discussions of citizenship come in book III, and much of Aristotle’s work on this subject intersects with discussing community.


Ecomodernism is a recent trend in environmental thinking during the past 20 years. It emphasizes human separation from nature through factors like technology and urban living in order to protect nature from the deleterious effects of human activity. It functions as one framework in which citizenship might be enacted in the Anthropocene. This Manifesto is relevant as a reference to the article in this bibliography which that analyzes how citizenship would function in an ecomodernist framework.


This article raises questions about extending citizenship to animals. There must be global civil society for global citizenship. The environment is relational and shared. Pursuing local values can be in tension with the global community. Community involves responsibilities in addition to relationships. Global civil society involves large organizations like the Red Cross, Catholic Church, and FIFA.


This is a poem that describes a model citizen from the point of view of the administrative state bureaucracy. The irony of the poem reflects the political tensions of the 1930s. The model citizen is written as male and is given a number rather than a name. There may be value in showing citizenship as it is understood in a particular time period.

A critique of citizenship as it is understood by liberalism, a framework that conceptualizes the environment and our relationship to it in a way that only understands the environment as human property.


This article is the contribution on citizenship to a book that employs the methods of Raymond Williams’s influential book, Keywords. This approach seeks to unpack the definitions of words in specific cultures, paying close attention to their historical and etymological influences. This sort of method understands language as protean, alive, and sensitive to context.


Although this print doesn’t deal with ecological matters, it still strikes me as an expression of citizenship. People have come together to fight for a unifying cause, and I think that this suggests that citizenship is not an atomistic concept but is intertwined with and is expressed in concurrence with others.


This article is a reaction to the El Paso shooting. It mentions John Tanton, an environmentalist and white nationalist. Ecofascists, like the El Paso shooter, associate migrations with environmental destruction.


Applies Frantz Fanon to issues of citizenship in Native American contexts. There are also some discussions of reciprocity in this text.


This is another article that can be helpful for thinking about the Ecomodernist/Dark Mountain Project divide when it comes to the Anthropocene. Crist doesn’t discuss citizenship, but the article nonetheless attacks Ecomodernist optimism concerning human domination/management of the Earth. Crist wants to move to a sense of the good that includes the broader web of life in which humans are included.


The Dark Mountain Project represents the oppositional side to the ecomodernists. The two sides are possible frameworks for life (such as how citizenship is understood) in the Anthropocene, but this one is much more raw and pessimistic than the ecomodernists, in the tradition of a thinker like Edward Abbey.


Dobson’s book looks to move beyond liberal and civic republican citizenship. One of the interesting things, I think, is his move to incorporate feminist philosophy and show how traditionally “feminine” virtues could be helpful for a new kind of citizenship that he deems “postкосmopolitanism.”


A useful book in understanding how animals fit into citizenship discourse. Divides animals into wild, domestic, and liminal animals and investigates our obligations to each of these groupings.


Discusses citizenship in cities and the need for it to have a spiritual dimension. Citizenship and a healthy relationship with non-human life are embedded in religion and culture. Suggests that the universal principles that accompany religion can and must manifest in action toward the civic good.


Outlines what democratic ecological citizenship is, suggesting it is a sort of civic faith that affirms interdependence of all religious and cultural faiths.
Evans, Hugh. “What Does It Mean to Be a Citizen of the World?” TED, May 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODLg_00f9BE.

Speaker discusses the issues with long-term global citizenship action. Citizenship is something done together and demands action. Suggests that citizenship must be conceived as global rather than local, a departure from some of the other views of other sources in this bibliography.


Looks at Leopold’s thinking on professionalism and citizenship with attention to the impact of the land ethic. This includes helpful biographical information about Leopold and discusses citizenship in clear language, accessible to a general readership.


This discusses recent developments in the law controlling citizenship status in India. Citizenship in India is connected with religion in this case, and the law is now being used to exclude Muslims. Perhaps this can speak to the “nastier” side of citizenship, that it is a political concept which can be used for harm/discrimination.


A book review of Martha Nussbaum’s Upheavals of Thought. See the entry on that work.


This is by a former mayor of Missoula, Montana. It talks about citizenship—especially civic republicanism—along with the difficulties it faces and the advocacy for it by early American figures like Thomas Jefferson. This book is useful for thinking about citizenship on the local level and how to actively participate in politics in pursuit of a common good.


Main framing here is that ecological citizenship will avoid an individualized approach to environmentalism that relies upon guilt and fear. Ecological citizenship moves away from addressing climate change in solely economic terms (e.g., individual consumers, homo economicus, etc.). Ecological citizenship can be communitarian or agnostic. This piece also includes a discussion of the Transition Town movement.


A Center for Humans and Nature favorite. The chapter, “Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide,” includes a discussion of citizenship. Reciprocity is a topic in the chapter. Kimmerer also suggests ways in which citizenship can be enacted, such as attending a town meeting and representing interests and points of view that would otherwise be excluded.


An image of African Americans casting votes. Lawrence is known for his paintings depicting the Great Migration.


A classic statement of the Land Ethic and land citizenship.


In addition to the citizenship news out of India, this is another recent event in citizenship. The article deals with Samoa and a federal judge’s decision that states that Samoans should be recognized as U.S. citizens. One situation this nullifies is the inability for Samoans to qualify for some U.S. government jobs. Samoans are not necessarily in favor of this measure as they fear that traditional cultural or religious practices might be threatened.

The Stanford Encyclopedia is a valuable source for general overviews of philosophical concepts and debates surrounding them.


This article talks about the need for public participation in restoration ecology. Broadly, Light advocates for democracy and wants ecological citizenship to be an environmental dimension of those obligations one already has to other humans. Often, the article refers to restoration ecology in Chicago, including a mention of the Chicago Wilderness Project! An interesting point made in this article is Light’s distinction between ecological identity and ecological citizenship. He thinks that the latter is better. The former relies too heavily on identity politics, and he thinks this can make it exclusionary. Instead, he wants citizens to support environmental projects and realize that they are compatible with and promote their existing self-interested goals.


I’m including this to supplement the other Light articles. While it doesn’t necessarily pertain to citizenship, it still speaks to urban areas and their importance in environmental consideration.


Discusses citizenship in urban contexts, so I think that this is a useful article to understand a rural/urban divide, which might complicate how one understands citizenship.


Long Soldier is an indigenous poet, and this collection makes an important contribution to one’s thinking about ecological citizenship.


Dovetails with some of the themes of the Seyfang piece. This piece suggests that citizenship is better equipped for caring about the Earth because it seeks to integrate the individual in the broader systems of the planet. Consumerism does not necessarily mean care for others.


A critique of liberalism that instead favors Aristotle and his virtue ethics approach. A foundational text in communitarianism. Sheds light on civic republicanism, the common good, and the human good.


Provides an ecofeminist perspective on citizenship. Also connects these areas with care ethics. The book speaks to barriers toward realizing active participation for women citizens, with ecofeminist theory informing the argument.


Another text opposed to liberalism and favoring a more communitarian/civic republican conception. An interesting thing is how Matthews argues for more local conceptions of community.


A critique of Rawls and communitarianism. Mouffe wants political communities to resist universal conceptions of the good and find common association in the rules by which a society is governed.


Argues that some reconciliation models reproduce settler
colonialism. This inhibits “deep reconciliation” because euro-descendent cosmologies are taken as more valuable than Indigenous cosmologies.


Discusses transition towns. The town discussed is Totnes, England. This method is a way of responding locally to climate change. Is democratic in that those who participate and are most affected by local decisions are the ones who make those decisions. Under that, citizenship in a transition town would be active with a thick notion of obligation.


An extensive account of Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. Shows areas of a flourishing human life that can develop citizens, rather than leaving agents as subjects in political life like under a monarchy.


A wonderful chapter on Aristotle. Aristotle’s rationality is less strict than a Kantian conception and allows an agent to break away from guiding principles when a situation demands so. A helpful essay when thinking about what might be expected of citizens, how they might act as agents in a democracy. Concludes with a discussion of education’s importance for a society.


Chapter eight has a commentary on citizenship and how the emotion of compassion relates to citizenship and public life. Nussbaum discusses her capabilities approach in that section. It provides a take on areas of human life that are important for citizens to develop.


Section titled “The Idea of Public Reason” is helpful in thinking about how citizens might engage in discourse within a civil society, specifically one that is pluralistic.


The crux of this is that individual actions/changes will not do much to address the ecological crisis. However, Sandler still thinks there is reason to do these things using a virtue ethics framework. In other words, these actions are still part of the virtuous life even if not everyone does them. Moreover, they could provide the basis for inspiring others.


Looks at consumption practices and their relationship to ecological citizenship (e.g., sustainable consumption). Analyzes this in terms of the United Kingdom. Within the market, sustainable consumption sends actors the wrong signals (author’s example is that fuel prices do not account for environmental costs), gross domestic product does not distinguish between things that do and do not enhance life, and consumers may not have information about the impact of their choices. Alternative view: 1) redefine terms like “wealth,” measure the economy through gauges like Measure of Domestic Progress; 2) eat local food; 3) use systems of community currency (informal exchange, second hand goods, recycling, etc.).


This book deals with the Mohawks of Kahnawàke. It discusses resistance to recognition of the effects of settler power and the importance of maintaining Indigenous culture.


Provides a nice example of Leopold’s collaborative conservation in action. Citizenship, at least in this context, is local and smaller in scale. I think this piece does a nice job of detailing the human stake in conservation. It’s important to work toward ecosystem health, but it is also imperative that human health and well-being are included in conservation effort.

Discusses how people can come together and mutually aid one another in a time of crisis. Relevant to the current COVID-19 pandemic and the assistance and community mindfulness that result from it.


This article investigates what ecomodernist thinking means for citizenship. It is especially helpful because it introduces a recent trend in philosophy of technology and environmental philosophy. It frames ecomodernism in the context of the rise of nationalism and the harmful effect this has on liberal citizenship. Introduces ecomodernism, which favors technofixes to fix environmental problems.


This article identifies ways of engaging with citizenship and forms of political participation. It is empirical with a little theoretical discussion. Talks about social media as a new frontier of citizen participation.


The authors argue that urban agriculture is inclusive and brings disenfranchised groups to the table in food decisions. This means that more concerns than just profit can be voiced when it comes to food production. Moreover, food decisions assume a democratic dimension.


Some more information on the Samoan citizenship situation. Looks at the perspective of some Samoans who believe that U.S. citizenship will harm Samoan culture. Customs about land ownership could be under threat because of the citizenship decision.


Brilliant collection of poetry that helps readers to think of kinship as it unfolds in global immigration or diaspora, and the implications of that for the understanding of citizenship and change for an individual. This change can involve a great deal of emotional trauma, and Kith captures that.


A forceful critique of the concept of “nature.” Aims at a more expansive notion of environmental philosophy and ecological protection. A helpful text for thinking about the Anthropocene and the politics of a society in this geological epoch.


Another collection of poetry dealing with diaspora. Explores this with respect to Vietnamese Americans. Vuong is a queer poet, and romantic love is central theme to his work.


A historical analysis of how citizenship as a concept has come to be.


Looks at citizenship and the good life under republicanism, Marxism, capitalism, and nationalism. Walzer critiques these four as being too singular and argues that a civil society view will be better. Civil society will better understand that there is a plurality of associations. In other words, we are not all proletarians (Marxism) or free consumers (capitalism) or people bound by tradition (nationalism). Instead, there are unions, producers, religious associations, etc., that make up society, a point missed in the four conceptions Walzer discusses. He wants multiple settings of participation.

This book is important in the field of cultural studies. It speaks to the dynamic of the rural–urban divide. It builds on Marx’s account of primitive accumulation (the transition from feudalism to capitalism), but Williams is not an orthodox Marxist. Rather than understanding economic processes as something solely economic or scientific, Williams uses British literature and poetry to understand the history of rural spaces and the experiences of those who once inhabited them.


This article lays out historical issues with the concept. Young provides a forceful critique of the masculine thinking that coats citizenship as a concept. She suggests that this sort of theorizing excludes other minority ways of knowing that can inform the concept.


Includes a poem called “Citizenship” that discusses immigration across the southern border.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**


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Alexander Moore is a graduate student at the University of Montana, Missoula where he is studying environmental philosophy. His research interests are environmentalism of urban areas, Thoreau, and wilderness. He completed an internship at the Center for Humans and Nature in 2019.
THE LAST WORD

A CONVERSATION: AFTER STAY AT HOME ORDERS AND BEFORE THE MURDER OF GEORGE FLOYD

Center President Brooke Hecht sat down for a conversation with Ceara Donnelley, Vice Chair of the Center’s Board of Directors, on April 7, 2020. As colleagues, good friends, and mothers of young children, they shared questions and ideas they have been considering as the novel coronavirus has turned worlds and worldviews upside down. The conversation, shared here, has been edited for clarity and length.

Brooke Hecht (BH): You sent me an article by Aisha S. Ahmad that I really appreciated. Ahmad shares, “Among my academic colleagues and friends, I have observed a common response to the continuing Covid-19 crisis. They are fighting valiantly for a sense of normalcy—hustling to move courses online, maintaining strict writing schedules, creating Montessori schools at their kitchen tables. They hope to buckle down for a short stint until things get back to normal. I wish anyone who pursues that path the very best of luck and health. Yet as someone who has experience with crises around the world, what I see behind this scramble for productivity is a perilous assumption. The answer to the question everyone is asking—‘When will this be over?’—is simple and obvious, yet terribly hard to accept. The answer is never.”

What are your thoughts on that? And, if you agree, how do we even begin to process that?

Ceara Donnelley (CD): I think the impulse for many of us right now is to launch into the “to do” list. Productivity is a way to cope with uncertainty—and perhaps to even imagine that we will “crush quarantine.” I think it’s a very normal human impulse, but it can go awry if there is no recognition that that is what we’re doing. And this drive to busy ourselves is not necessarily predicated on a belief that this is a short-term challenge. It’s more a way of attempting to assert control in a situation where we have no control. Because if we actually consider the enormity of what’s happening, or the absolute uncertainty of what this means or how long we’ll be in it, it can feel like too much.

Sinking into a new reality is not something we can rush. We are learning day by day what the reality of this situation is and how we can best exist within it. Something that has become increasingly apparent for me in the last few weeks is that we don’t even really know yet what it is that we are going through. This time reminds me, potently and powerfully, of the time that my parents were in hospice. I knew that my world was changing in the most life-altering, profound sorts of ways. And yet I could not speed up my understanding of the changes. I just couldn’t. I just had to get through the days, with a mixture of awareness of the bigness of what was going on combined with the necessity of surviving.

The coronavirus is a clear reminder that we humans are organisms and that we are embedded within nature’s realities. Perhaps we’ve all been compartmentalizing too much—and creating a very strange “reality” around ourselves?

BH: Part of what we are experiencing right now is a clear look in the mirror—and not just a reflection of how we respond individually to crises, but also a reflection of where cultural, political, and institutional systems work and where they do not. Inequality, broken healthcare systems, and fragile economies are laid bare.

Another clear truth is that we humans are in fact able to change certain realities very quickly—practically overnight. As stated in the Center for Humans and Nature’s manifesto: “Business as usual is not inevitable; we can create the future we seek.”
There is a huge void of leadership from the top right now... Yet there is a collective wisdom bubbling up right now. We are thinking together about what it means to be a responsible citizen.

 BH: Sometimes I think we have more power than we realize. I have to believe that there will be many leaders who stand with and behind the idea of imagining the world anew. It’s no longer a tenable excuse that we humans are incapable of substantial, lifesaving, and rapid change. What if there is a collective of organizations and individuals who stand up to say that we are not going back to business as usual? One small example could be organizations that continue the practice of canceling or not attending “non-essential meetings.” Why were we even having non-essential meetings in the first place?

Charles Eisenstein says, “COVID demonstrates the power of our collective will when we agree on what is important. What else might we achieve, in coherency? What do we want to achieve, and what world shall we create? That is always the next question when anyone awakens to their power.”

What could a new manifesto—of what we believe is possible—look like?

Ceara’s eight-year-old daughter enters and describes an alligator she is watching—ironically through a nest camera—at their home outside Charleston, South Carolina. Ceara pauses for a conversation with her daughter before resuming her call with Brooke.
THE LAST WORD

BH: I’m thinking back to what you said earlier—that sinking into a new reality is not something we can rush. To that end, quarantine does give us time. If we are in some form of quarantine for the next twelve to eighteen months, it is not just COVID-19 we will be facing. We will also have the pressing ecological and social justice issues—that are present throughout the world—remaining squarely in front of us. The novel coronavirus is sharpening our focus on these social and environmental challenges.

I recently listened to excellent interview done by Meghna Chakrabarti with Rebecca Solnit on WBUR’s On Point. One of the callers to the show used the phrase “forced opportunity” to describe our current time. Our response to this virus cannot just be that this virus is “the enemy,” but rather it needs to very explicitly and tangibly address the wrongs the virus is mirroring back to us.

CD: This gets to the question of silver linings. You have told me about your discomfort with the idea of “silver linings” with respect to this pandemic. I don’t have that same kind of discomfort. Again, I relate it very personally to my experience with my parents dying. The fact of their deaths—the experience of it—was something that made me who I am in ways that I wouldn’t want to give up. I’m a better person for having gone through those experiences and those losses. Would I change history, and not have them die if I could? Yes. One hundred percent. But the fact that they did, the fact of their cancers, had an unbelievably beneficial impact on my development as a human being. Those two things have to be able to co-exist. It’s not that one justifies the other. But rather the task is to take death and loss and profound uncertainty—and make meaning out of it. The meaning is the silver lining. To not make meaning would be the irresponsible thing, I think.

BH: That is so well said.

It has been hard for me to hear people talking about the “silver lining” of the coronavirus. While I think it is very good news to hear—and see pictures—of reduced pollution and the return of birds and fish to areas where they had been absent, I nonetheless experience a terrible awkwardness with any thought of a “silver lining.” People are dying and, as we have said, in many cases it is the most vulnerable among us. There is increased racism, authoritarianism, nationalism, more power grabs. How do we process beauty in such a terrible context? I’m in a murky place in this regard.

People are dying and, as we have said, in many cases it is the most vulnerable among us. There is increased racism, authoritarianism, nationalism, more power grabs. How do we process beauty in such a terrible context?

If I’m being honest, maybe what is hard for me with regard to the “silver lining” is that I find it to be very, very difficult to hold together two opposing things. It is hard to hold grief, fear, and uncertainty together with love, joy, gratitude, and insight. Speaking for myself, my default is to want to experience these things separately, to keep a wall between these different kinds of emotions. In a conversation earlier today with WPR colleague Anne Strainchamps, Anne talked about the fabric being ripped between these two emotional spheres—that they are now bleeding together. She helped me realize that this is yet another compartmentalization that I have been carrying—and
that keeping these kinds of emotions separate and in their own containers does not allow for the fullness of human experience.

**CD:** Yes, it is hard. But, honestly, that is what I have learned from my parents’ deaths: In that loss and grief, I have experienced the most direct, profound beauty and meaning I’ve ever encountered in life—well, outside of parenthood. It’s a stripping down of artifice to the essence of humanity. And the essence of humanity can’t just be pure joy, or pure sadness, or pure grief. I see those things as inextricably linked. I just read an article in the *New York Times* about happiness versus meaning at this time. The author, Emily Esfahani Smith, used a term I hadn’t heard before: post-traumatic growth. While trauma can certainly cause post-traumatic stress disorder, it can also serve as a foundation for meaning making. And, collectively, that’s what this time is—the opportunity for transformative, powerful growth.

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**Seeking the space to explore life’s big questions, Brooke Hecht joined the Center for Humans and Nature in 2005 as a Research Associate. She has been the President of the Center since 2008. Whether through the Center’s Questions for a Resilient Future program or other Center initiatives, her work explores what it means to be human and what our responsibilities are to each other and the whole community of life.**

**Since 2008, Ceara Donnelley, JD has been deeply involved in the work of the Center for Humans and Nature, serving as Strategic Counsel of the Center and Vice Chair of its Board of Directors. She is also Chair of the board of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League and founder of Ceara Donnelley Ltd. Co., an interior design studio based in Charleston.**

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**NOTES**


5. See her page at: www.ttbook.org/people/anne-strainchamps.

Liberty and the Ecological Crisis

Freedom on a Finite Planet

Edited by Christopher J. Orr, Kaitlin Kish and Bruce Jennings

Series: Routledge Explorations in Environmental Studies

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