



Siding with the world: Reciprocal expressions of human and nature in an impending era of loneliness

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that our embodied and emotional attachments to the non-human world must be carried forward in an effort to comprehend nature in interdependent and agential terms. Such an understanding may allow a new ethical configuration in which the interactions between humans and nature become an “an active collaborative process” (Plumwood, 2001: 16). In this respect, the agencies of both humanity and nature are placed within reciprocal relationships of consequence. The paper begins by reviewing the limitations of dominant conceptualizations of nature that emphatically exclude it from the human realm of agency and ethical consideration. It then considers alternate theorizations that forward relational aspects and proximities of nature, particularly in terms of expanded concepts of time, agency and affect (e.g.: Greenhouse, 1996; Plumwood, 2001). Collaborative relations between human and non-human worlds are also re-considered through phenomenological accounts (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Toadvine, 2009), which emphasize a productive dialectic of experience and recognition. In conclusion, the paper argues that the validation of emotional and agential relations between human and non-human life allow for more ethical and less destructive engagement. In recognizing such correspondences, we are also impelled to recognize the biophysical limits of all life that is threatened under climate change.

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1. The era of loneliness

The weather is behaving badly. This year, as with years past, the violence of ‘extreme weather’ has come fast and frequently. It has become difficult to know what to expect.

While the weather mediates between our social and physical bodies, it is also decidedly non-human: a phenomenon beyond our control. Rather than acted upon by human intent, weather is a natural force that is autonomous and seemingly agential in its behaviour. The weather warms our bodies, drenches us, or makes us very cold and it can change quickly. Our relationship to the agency of weather is social and structural, embodied and emotional. We feel it.

Yet, climate is something different. NASA describes the difference between weather and climate as “a difference in time” (NASA, 2005). Whereas weather changes day-by-day or hour-by-hour, climate is the average of long-term, seasonal or annual changes in the atmosphere. Such averages also involve anticipation, as in the

adage “climate is what you expect and weather is what you get”. Paradoxically, such normalized expectations now fail to materialize as the world’s climate is increasingly shaped by human influence.

The story of climate change is one of excess and loss. The year 2010 saw the concentration of carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere reach 389 parts per million, a concentration 74 ppm higher than in 1958, when records of CO₂ in the atmosphere began (NOAA, 2010). This year was also the warmest (alongside 2005) to be recorded in human history, which paradoxically saw an unusually high number of severe winter storms (again, like 2005) in the North Eastern United States, Canada and parts of Europe. The earth now appears to be experiencing what was once nightmarishly predicted. In 2002, the first Global Biodiversity Report published by the Convention on Biological Diversity predicted that over a million species of animal life – or one quarter of the earth’s creatures – would be extinct by 2050 due to the habitat loss caused by global warming and human development. Today, the plight of the Arctic’s polar bear, who are starving because the diminishing sea-ice upon which they hunt can no longer bear their weight, gestures towards the potential accuracy of this prediction. The biologist E.O. Wilson states this probability more decisively: “...the sixth mass extinction has begun.... [Now] we will enter what poets

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and scientists alike may choose to call the Eremozoic Era – the Era of Loneliness. We will have done it all on our own, and conscious of what was happening” (Wilson, 2006: 91).

Optimism seems misplaced in this present scenario. That significant futurity which was once the *sine qua non* of a rational modernity – the self-confident assurance that things can only get better and never worse – seems useful now only for the purposes of Hallmark greeting cards. There is much that makes us despair, especially when confronted by the everyday acts of wilful ignorance that continue to drive the earth’s warming. Social action on climate change has yet to be naturalized on a mass-mediated level. In fact, as the indications and effects of anthropogenic global warming become more pronounced, so too do the sneering denials that it exists (Pew Research Center, 2010). The only facts worth knowing have become unspeakable, *verboten* vulgarities never to be uttered out-loud in polite company.

A well-known quotation by the ecologist Aldo Leopold speaks perfectly of the surreal sense of ostracism that lies at the heart of this contradiction:

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise” (1993: 197).

Leopold was a scientist, and therefore privileged (or burdened) with a distanced perspective. And yet Leopold here is speaking of the emotional consequences – frustration, alienation, sadness – borne of a paradoxical demand that he, as a scientist, knows, but cannot acknowledge the truth of that knowing. While the continued failure to respond to climate change is due to a complex confluence of social and ideological factors, the message of scientists and environmentalists regarding climate change may also “present a lethal threat to the central immortality project of Western society: perpetual economic growth, supported by an ideology of entitlement and exceptionalism” (Monbiot, 2010: n.p.) Such human exceptionalism is no doubt due in large part to the successes of alienation in Western capitalist societies, particularly commodity fetishism and the alienation of ‘nature’. For many urban people, experience of nature comes as the view from a window; a mediated landscape of little consequence. Such conceptual distances also support an emotional detachment from the consequences of modern humanity’s destruction of non-human life. Those things that matter to nature should have little bearing upon the human. Such are the externalities of the indifference that results from the exclusion of nature from ethical consideration.

Not all people are capable of indifference to nature. For many, the response to climate change involves not just conceptual, but emotional and physiological affects. Feelings of profound sadness, anger or anxiety can accompany the loss of a familiar world, especially when premised upon an embodied and experiential knowledge of a place (Albrecht et al., 2007). And yet, perhaps such affectual and corporeal realities may be mined as a means to advocate social change. The prospect of a world made silent of bird song – a scenario which signals the collapse of an entire ecological system (Carson, 1962) – may also redirect our attention to the interdependent relations between human and non-human worlds. In its silence, “nature”, as Michel Serres puts it, “is reminding us of its existence” (1995: 29). Perhaps such absent reminders may engender a new vitality, new ways of knowing and feeling *life* in that doubled sense which Nigel Thrift draws attention to, as both “the grasp of life and emotional attunement to it” (2000: 46).

The anthropologist Carol Greenhouse has argued that, “time articulates people’s understandings of agency: literally, what

makes things happen and what makes acts relevant in relation to social experience, however conceived” (1996: 1). The future has long remained an important rhetorical element for the “imaginary communities” of modern nation-states (Anderson, 1983), especially as it represents an inevitable and predestined path of opportunity and progress for its citizens. What type of “broad and varied meanings [may] people attach to questions of possibility, causation and relevance” (Greenhouse, 1996: 83) in a world that is repeatedly described as “running out of time”? More importantly, in what ways may the attribution of agency be prised from the exclusive grasp of the human and afforded to nature in these changing times?

This paper argues that our embodied and emotional engagements to the non-human world must be carried forward in an effort to comprehend nature in integral, interdependent and agential terms. Such an understanding may allow a new ethical configuration in which the interaction between people and nature is known as “an active collaborative process” (Plumwood, 2001: 16) and the agencies of both humanity and nature are placed within reciprocal relationships of consequence. In thinking through this possibility, the paper begins by reviewing the limitations of dominant conceptualizations of nature that emphatically exclude it from the human realm of agency and ethical consideration. It then considers alternate theorizations that forward relational aspects and proximities of nature, particularly in terms of expanded concepts of time, agency and the emotional and embodied relationships that exist between animal and human (e.g.: Greenhouse, 1996; Bastian, 2009; Plumwood, 2001). These collaborative relations between human and non-human actors and worlds are also re-considered through phenomenological accounts (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Toadvine, 2009), which emphasize a productive dialectic of experience and recognition. In conclusion, the paper argues that the validation of emotional and agential relations between human and non-human life allow for more ethical and less destructive engagement. In recognizing such correspondences, we are also impelled to recognize the biophysical limits of all life that is threatened under climate change.

2. The alienation of nature

It may seem that it was just the Earth’s bad luck that awareness of global warming occurred at the same historical moment that globalization, neo-liberalism and advanced consumerism were to dramatically alter our social, cultural and natural environments. But such misfortune was not just the result of some uncanny conjuncture in time. This massive socio-structural shift was most characterized by alienation: the alienations of global finance capital from local production; of labour from production; of consumer from producer; of private individual from the public common wealth; and human from non-human. All this of course is familiar intellectual territory. But the legacy of the empty signifier and the commodity fetishism that is its *modus operandi* is still premised in our conceptualizations of and actions upon the natural world. We in the West were able to continue forgetting about it.

The natural non-human world has long served as a handy *oubliette* for the excesses of consumer society: into which is tossed the once desired, the instantly obsolescent, the immediately forgotten without a second thought. At the heart of the North Pacific Ocean’s Subtropical Gyre is a flotilla of trash that is purportedly as large as the American state of Texas (Hohn, 2008: 5). Very few people ever see this mass of detritus nor may they know of the plastic bits and pieces that regularly accumulate in the guts of sea creatures. The mediations of supermarket, pharmacy, gas station and kitchen tap removes the conditions of production from our consideration and holds the materialities of nature at a safe distance, so that we may get on with the business of getting more.

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