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Care in the time of catastrophe: citizenship, community and the ecological imagination

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Care in the Time of Catastrophe: Citizenship, Community and the Ecological Imagination.

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Over the last few decades the apparent effects of the ecological unsustainability of current global regimes of production has become more pressing. Recent calculations by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) indicated that, at current levels of consumption of renewable natural resources, by the year 2050 we will require at least a second whole planet earth to meet global needs. The implication of these findings is that we are already in a kind of `ecological overdraft', which means that present demands are digging deep into the planet's `capital stocks of forest, fish and fertile soils' in a way that is clearly unsustainable (WWF, 2002).

While the field of environmental ethics and politics is, as we would expect, a contested one, there is a degree of consensus that the basic premise is one of the limits of our planet. In keeping with the tenor of critical environmental analysis, the WWF report argues that we must expect some kind of severe `ecological backlash' if current trends continue. Already, they claim, the world is losing its biological diversity at a rate comparable with the mass extinction events that have occurred only five or six times in the Earth's history (WWF, 2002).

Alongside this sense of a global ecological fragility that affects us all, the WWF is careful to point out that neither culpability for human-induced environmental change, nor vulnerability to the resulting hazards are evenly shared. Over the last two decades, the idea that the sustainability issue raises fundamental questions about justice on a global scale has cemented itself deeply in environmental discourses. Unavoidably, it now seems, those of us in the west must face the charge that the level of `development' we have attained cannot conceivably be generalised to the entire population of the planet. Furthermore, we must confront the possibility that our standard of living is implicated in global environmental changes that will both endanger people elsewhere who have not enjoyed similar life styles and erode the life chances of future generations.

In this way, even before we begin to consider the interests of the non-human world, the environmental implications of development and the question of its delimitation raises issues that are cognitive, political and ethical. As it becomes ever more apparent that our actions entangle our lives with the lives of `others' distant in time or space, there is cause to ponder where our communities start and finish, and to ask who is deserving of the benefits that accrue from membership of these communities. This iterates the sort of debates about citizenship previously associated with the city or the nationstate. Applied now to the radically extended arena of the globe in its entirety, these discussions are crystallizing around the notion of `ecological citizenship' (Smith, 1998, Christoff, 1999, Dobson, 2000).

Shadowing current explorations of an ecological citizenship is a fear that the severity of environmental problems might foment the rise of new universal rules of progress which could bring our social lives under an intensified set of hierarchies and controls. Such a project is likely to be perceived (mostly correctly) as authoritarian, and a betrayal of the ethical opportunities opened by diverse and popular participation in environmental struggles. As Alain Touraine (2000:147) argues, 'our late modernity is primarily worried about its survival and the risks it is running. It aspires to being neither a society of order nor a society of progress, but a communications-based society, and it is therefore more afraid of intolerance than of poverty or illegality'. In this light, those writers articulating concepts of ecological citizenship seem to share a strong sense that obligations freely felt have a better chance of being enacted than bureaucratic imperatives that are handed down.

It hardly needs noting that for a new ethical-political orientation to be at once popular and decisive, voluntary and far-reaching is a tall order. Captivated by the promise of new modes of ecological citizenship, we focus here on some of the challenges to its uptake and diffusion. What concerns us is the gulf between the cultural sensibilities that an effective ecological citizenship would seem to demand, and the values and priorities that predominate in the social milieus from which we are setting out. To put it bluntly, the prominence of consumption in contemporary western culture – with its high estimation for individual autonomy, freedom to chose and unrestrained pleasure-seeking - is an unlikely seedbed for the kind of self-limitation, collective responsibility and altruism which the new modes of citizenship appear to call for (see Bauman 2000: Ch 2).

In order to develop civic cultures that are pleasurable as well as sustainable, we suggest, a place must be made for play, self-expression and experimentation. But this need not be out of keeping with an expanded sense of obligation to vulnerable others. Drawing environmental responsibility in the direction of what Jonathan Rutherford (2000) calls an `art of life', or what John Caputo (1993) describes as a `poetics of obligation', we make a case for a kind of responsiveness to the needs of endangered strangers - both human and non-human - that is once life-affirming, generous and generative. Such an approach to self-creation and responsibility, we suggest, needs to be situated within a sense of community that is itself open to the summons and the offerings of strangers. Conceiving of others not simply as threats or burdens, but as potential contributors to social and cultural transformation, could help make a moral laboratory of civil society, offering a countercurrent to market forces and exclusively state driven solutions (see Walzer

1992). Our account in this respect seeks to reconnect ecological questions to an expanded sense of care and obligation, a rethinking of the human-nature relation, and a deepening of `cosmopolitan' sensibilities.

Expanding Rights and Ecological Obligations

One of the most striking characteristics of emergent discourses on ecological citizenship is the relative shift in emphasis from human rights to duties or obligations. This turn has been prompted by certain inadequacies that became apparent when the pressure of environmental issues began to push claims for entitlement beyond the conventional bounds of rights discourse. These developments are best seen not as a back-pedalling on issues of universal rights, but as their supplement. It is important to remember that questions of human rights played an axial role in the convergence of issues of sustainability and development. For example, the 1992 Earth Summit was able to build bridges between North and South by recognising the entitlements of present and future generations to health and environmental security (Falk 1995). Indeed the recognition of such human rights have encouraged the normative recognition that problems such as ozone depletion and global warming are bigger than any single nation-state (Held et al 2001).

Rights, however, can cut both ways (Haywood 2000). This is demonstrated by the Bush adminstration's defense of the right of Americans to persist in their chosen way of life – against any firm national commitment to reducing carbon emissions. What is foregrounded by the issue of western responsibility for global environmental change is the question of duties or obligations, as the necessary counterpart to the rights to economic equity and environmental security now being claimed by much of the rest of the world. But the political and ethical challenge of environmental issues on a global scale goes deeper than this. As the arena of debate shifts beyond individual nation-states the very idea of a bounded `moral community' that underpins conventional liberal ethics comes into question.

Tied to the idea of a distinct, shared space was the assumption of reciprocity. That is, one gained rights or entitlements on account of acknowledging or affording the same benefits to others (Smith 1998: 18; Dobson, 2000: 42-3). This coupling of reciprocity with territoriality, however, is severely stretched once the grounds for ethical consideration are extended to take in spatially –distant others, such as those made vulnerable by climate change elsewhere on the planet. More challenging still are the interests of future generations - who by definition cannot reciprocate our considerations. In this way, obligations are at once elevated, deterritorialised, and severed from rights. As Andrew Dobson concludes: `it is the unreciprocated and unilateral nature of the obligations of ecological citizenship that distinguishes it most clearly from more dominant forms of citizenship in liberal democratic societies, and in this sense it disrupts these dominant forms' (2000: 44).

The issue of extending rights to other species, or to non-living entities in the physical world further problematises the received notion of a moral community underpinned by reciprocity. For some environmentalists, the ethical consideration of the non-human world comes as the logical extension of an `expanding circle' of rights: by which they refer to that steadily broadening sphere of inclusivity beyond the original restriction of rights to privileged white males (see Smith 1999: 4, 1998: Ch 3). The question of whether animals, plants or inanimate objects can reasonably be said to have `moral rights', and whether it is feasible to identify and articulate their interests has been hotly debated. The general tenor of these discussions, however, suggests that some form of ethical consideration of the non-human world is axiomatic to contemporary ecological thought and practice. In his take on ecological citizenship, Mark Smith is unequivocal: `the relations of entitlement and obligation break through the species barrier and beyond' (1998: 99).

Exacting Justice, Imposing Limits
We should not underestimate what is entailed by the reprioritizing of obligation in the environmental context, particularly for those of us who live in the planet's wealthier regions. A strong commitment to sustainability would have deep-reaching implications for our productive and consumptive practices. As Smith puts it: (t)his means that human beings have to exercise extreme caution before embarking upon any project which is likely to have the possibility of adverse effects upon the ecosystems concerned. The limits that this places upon human action are severe' (1998: 99). Any move towards a more just distribution of the costs and benefits of utilising the earth's resources, not to mention restitution for past imbalances, is going to put a further, and no less momentous, set of alternative priorities before our own interests.

For many environmental theorists, such an elevation of restraint and responsibility over untrammelled self-interest would constitute a radical transformation in values. In this sense, both a more altruistic relation to others in civil society, and a less utilitarian orientation to nature would be read as indicators of a shift beyond the instrumentalism seen as dominating modernity thus far (see Christoff, 1999: 404; Barry, 1999:115; Smith, 1998: 97). But even if we do move beyond the use of others – human and non-human - as means to our own ends, questions of justice and sustainability may not so easily escape the grip of calculating rationality. The quest for fairness, as Dobson reminds us, renders justice

a `chilly virtue', for it demands a strict and impartial calculus of responsibility and entitlement (1998: 229, 236). Likewise, any attempt to operationalise concerns about the trans-generational impact of human activities soon arrives at the no-less chilly practicalities of opportunity costing, measurable indicators, tradeoffs and discounting (see Norton, 1999)

Current global climate change negotiations should be evidence enough that the quest for environmental justice and sustainability is bound up in dense networks of calculation, regulation and monitoring. It is the fear of an extending `panopticization of the earth' (Derrida, 1993: 21) that has prompted a number of critical commentators to express concern over a new form of instrumental rationalization driven by ecological alarm. At once globally scaled, and reaching down into the everyday level of human conduct, this new form of environmental `governmentality', critics suggest, is a far cry from the revaluation of values that more sanguine environmentalists are anticipating. Drawing on Michel Foucault's influential formulation of modern societies as sites of deeply inscribed self-control, Timothy Luke (1995), Catriona Sandilands (1999) and others look past the claims of open debate and uncoerced value shifts to discern a new wave of surveillance, discipline and self-monitoring that inheres in the ideal of `the good ecological citizen'.

Those schooled in an earlier tradition of social theory might also pick up the echoes of Max Weber's thesis on the role of ethical ideals of duty and self-discipline in the crystallization of modern capitalism. Weber's prediction of the persistence of a `this-worldly asceticism' 'until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt' may have seemed indefensible for some time, but it would be an ironic footnote if the environmental consequences of utilising all that fossil fuel were to restore the old Protestant virtues to life (1976: 181, see Szerzynski, 1997: 43). It is the question of sustainability, in particular, with its `precautionary' orientation to all human activity, that seems suggestive of a trumping of Weber's early capitalists with its insistence on economising resource use and its universal calculus of inputs and outputs. If a principled self–restraint and well-computed anti-hedonism did indeed play some part in the emergence of capitalist modernity, as Weber suggested, then the fact that the resuscitation of these very values should be seen as a source of modernity's radical redirection, is, at very least, cause for scepticism.

Georges Bataille – whose writings offer a kind of bridge between the work of Weber and Foucault - warned of the rise of a `general submission to the concern for the future' and of its sorry consequences for our daily enjoyment of life (1993: 379). Today, it seems, it is the looming sense of the absolute limits of the biosphere and the accompanying vision of planet-scale scarcity that is haunting our everyday pleasures. Against this backdrop of inescapable scarcity, both the issue of sustainability and the question of global environmental justice now appear to importune against unrestrained human desire, adding new fuel to what is, as Foucault and Weber remind us, an old and familiar anxiety.

On Scarcity and Exuberance
There are tactical as well as `ethico-aesthetic' reasons for disquiet over some of the directions that a sense of ecological obligation might now be taking us. Calls for self-restraint, generally expressing a deep distrust over the gratifications of consumerism, make it difficult to envisage a transition from current lifestyles and cultural values to the alternative orientations anticipated by many environmentalists. As Andrew Ross puts it plainly, `(p)eople respond better to a call for social fulfillment than to a summons for physical deprivation' (1994: 268).

In response, a number of theorists have offered alternatives that are less suggestive of self-denial. Kate Soper argues that ecological perspectives need to develop what she terms an 'alternative hedonism' (1995: 168). Eschewing both blanket condemnations of consumption and `prevalent Western assumptions about flourishing' she advocates forms of self-fulfillment revolving around 'more modest and less privatised pleasures' (2000: 24-5). Sandilands (1999: 93) makes a case for a `polymorphous' pleasure-seeking that entails an expressive and experimental approach towards all aspects of our personal lives. Eric Darier, likewise taking cues from the later Foucault, talks of a green `aesthetics of existence'; a cultivation of self in the light of ecological concerns that is at once self-critical and alive to the possibility of thinking differently, acting differently, and thereby `becoming something different from what we have been made' (1999: 233).

Each of these writers, in their own way, resists the idea of ecological limits being evoked as a constraint on self-expression or social possibility. What they wish to avoid, in Sandilands words, is `nature's primary appearance in human life … as a limit to human *excess*, including, potentially, an excess of human freedom' (1999: 86). Without denying the materiality of the physical world, Soper, Sandilands and Darier each unsettle `natural' imperatives by reminding us of the discursive construction of ecological limits - and of nature in general. Their case resonates strongly with the argument presented by Hans Achterhuis (1993) that universal scarcity - which he suggests is quite distinct from the experience of periodic shortfalls - is a social construction: one, moreover, which is closely tied to the emergence of modern economies.

By exploring the social and historical constitution of certain crucial concepts in this way, the sociological imagination is usefully wielded against some of the strictures of the ecological imagination. There may, however, be ways of extracting ourselves from a zero-sum game between human potentiality and the earth's resourcefulness that have been less well rehearsed. The ethical-aesthetic sensibilities of Foucault which inform Darier's and Sandilands pronouncements, we should recall, inherit a tradition of thinking through the rich potentiality of `life' that can be traced back through the

work of Bataille, to Nietzsche and beyond. Besides reminding us that `nature' can be construed by human beings in many ways, this line of thought affirms the actual physical power of life - in all its guises - to produce new forms and expressions.

Nietzsche, putting his own spin on the lessons of thermodynamics, described the world as `a monster of energy, without beginning, without end' (1968: 550). Drawing together Nietzsche's sense of an unceasing, energy-infused vitality of life with insights from the Soviet scientist Vladimir Vernadsky – who popularized the notion of the `biosphere' – Bataille came up with a vision of social and biological life that put excess and exuberance at centre stage. At the same time, however, he gave full consideration to the significance of physical limits. For Bataille, the constant flow of solar energy bathing the earth's surface is ultimately surplus to the requirements of living matter: it may be expended in growth or proliferation but eventually the limits of terrestrial space require that it must be `squandered' in some way. The eventual necessity of `uselessly' using up accumulated matter-energy presents a basic fact of life for all organisms, ourselves included. In this way, death, catastrophe and extinction are all necessary manifestations of the `explosive' force of life, for they `make room for fresh beings coming into the cycle with renewed vigour', and are thereby a vital part of the creative and generative process (Bataille 1986: 59).

While Bataille has largely been passed over in environmental discourses, his `exuberant' vision of life has found a warm reception in the `new biology', a `non traditional' approach to the biological sciences which emphasises the composite nature of living bodies and the resilience of life in the face of disturbance (Margulis and Sagan, 1995: 164-5, Sagan, 1992: 375-6). What is revealing to note is that prior to the rise of the modern environmental movement, and long before most of his fellow social scientists had begun to consider ecological issues, Bataille had a clear sense that modern economies were contributing to potentially a devastating build up of energy. `(U)nprecedent accumulation', he claimed, `… has turned the whole world into a colossal powder keg' (1993: 428). In the context of global warming, Bataille's precept of a `global exuberance of energy' (1991:74) has begun to appear more prescient than eccentric. Many of today's `ecological issues', from bioinvasion to emergent viruses, lake eutrophication to antibiotic resistance, are less symptomatic of a retreat of life so much as its unremitting vitality. In this way, Bataille's insights chime with the conclusion of biologist Lynn Margulis, who highlights the `shocking prodigiousness' of the living world, and reminds us that life `has fed on disaster and destruction from the beginning' (1998: 137, 151).

The lesson we might draw from Bataille, and from those who have taken his work seriously, is not that ecosystems are immune to human impact, but that limits and excess are irrevocably bound together in the workings of our biosphere. And that human social life is unavoidably implicated in this interplay. In this way, the green `aesthetics of existence' affirmed by Darier and others might draw its energy not merely from a sense of discursive play, but from the knowledge that human social life is inevitably open to the greater play of life in general. A more `exuberant' ecological imagination along such lines would not preclude an exacting quest for justice or sustainability, but it might add a vital complementary charge: that of `gratitude toward the rich ambiguity of life' that exceeds all calculation (see Connolly, 1999: 139).

Care and the Encounter
One of advantages of an appeal to the diversity and fecundity of life – one which plays to a love of novelty, new forms and overflowing richness – is that it is not alien to the pleasures many of us glean from consumer experience. In this way, a bridge opens between everyday values and hoped-for `trans-valuations' – though it is a slender and unfinished one.  What we should not forget, however is the ambivalence of a ceaseless and energised `becoming': the fact that it necessarily entails destruction as well as creation, suffering along with jouissance. Indeed, the contemporary earth and life sciences, in addressing the dynamics of global environmental change, are being constantly challenged by the degree of natural variability and cyclicality in the workings of our planet. Quite apart from the human contribution to transformations in climate and other earth processes, it is the extent of the `background noise' of upheaval, outbreak and catastrophe that is now impressing itself on the scientific imagination. `The "normal" state of nature' it has been said, `is to be recovering from the last disaster' (Budiansky: 1995: 71). And in this sense, the vulnerabilty and suffering can be seen as the inevitable flipside of life's resilience and generativity

This ubiquity of disaster – at scales both intimate and vast – suggests that there is more to obligation than revelling in the supererogatary productions of the living world. While `disaster in general', like exuberance or fecundity may be part of the shared experience of all life, disastrous events -  in their harrowing singularity - bring to the fore the estrangement and desolation that can befall individual beings.  The literal meaning of `disaster' is to lose one's star, or to be disoriented, as John Caputo reminds us (1993: 6). So whilst our immersion in the overflowing richness of life may provide one experience of `difference', it is another kind of difference' that is revealed to us by the fallout from life's perturbing moments. This other difference, as Caputo explains, is alterity: that `absolute' difference which is epitomised by the outsider, the stranger, the one who appears before us uninvited and unanticipated (1993: 59).

The encounter with alterity, somewhat surprisingly, has been peripheral to environmental ethics. The `expanding circle' approach to rights, as Dobson has noted, hinges on qualities *shared* by various communities and beings. At heart, its logic - in keeping with the mainstream of western philosophy - is one of identification: the recognition of the self in the

other (Dobson, 1998: 232). It is in this light, that Dobson has suggested that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas – the preeminent philosopher of alterity – might inject a fresh thematic into the discourse on ecological citizenship. For Levinas, the encounter with a stranger – an other who calls for our recognition and our `non-indifference' merely by their existence - is an event that is essentially prior to reflection or intentionality, and as such it can be seen as a formative experience of social and philosophical life (Levinas, 1989: 63-4, 84-5). Although the ethical precept of an invitation to care for those from whom we can expect nothing in return was largely applied by Levinas to the relationship between human others, Dobson ponders its relevance to the broader realm of ecological relations (1998: 231-7; see also Bauman,1993: 219-222).   What materializes is a potential relationship to the diverse beings with whom we coexist that puts their flourishing even before our own weighing-up of self-interest. And in this way, the `chilly' calculus of justice might begin to give way to a sort of `supererogatory' sense of caring and responsibility, an `ethics without reserve' (Dobson, 1998: 236-7, Caputo, 1995: 5).

Though they have quite distinct philosophical lineages, the incalculability and excessiveness of Levinasian compassion and the undelimitable becoming of Bataille and Neitzche resonate in promising ways. Both seem to offer windows to a world of ethical and political practice that is unencumbered by environmental thought's characteristic enthrallment with restraint. Yet the charge has often been levelled at Levinas that *his* ethical stance, too, is an earnest and pious one, so exacting in its call to place the other's interests before our own that it effectively replaces one set of strictures and constraints with another (Smart, 1999: 187, Caputo, 1993: 124). And it is difficult to not to feel this gravity, this summons to abnegation emanating from Levinas's writing at numerous turns. We might be forgiven for thinking that, as an inducement to ecological obligation, sainthood has not much over neo-puritan self-discipline.

But there is a twist on Levinasian obligation that might offer an escape-route from the extreme unilateralism of its demands. It should be kept in mind that the ethical orientation of Levinas does not rule out the giver or host receiving something from the recipient; it simply tries to constitute such engagements apart from the expectation of a fair exchange and the cost-benefit analyses that are implicit in the framing of reciprocity. As Jacques Derrida (1978: 83-6) has emphasized in his reading of Levinas, an encounter with a stranger that is without presuppositions, that has no guardrails, is inevitably an opening up to the other. And in this way `the event' of the meeting is unlikely to leave either party unchanged.  As a `unique event, a momentary present…a spark' , in Levinas's words (1989: 69-70), the outcome of the encounter with some one or some thing strange is inherently unpredictable, and in this way may be seen as a potential source of surprise. Such a meeting of strangers, Derrida suggests, is not so much *a* source of novelty, fecundity or transformation, as *the* condition of creativity (1978: 86). The move to welcome the other is the very `movement of desire', a surrender to change which forgoes expectation or known end (Derrida, 1978: 93).

To be responsible, then, is also to be responsive, to be generous is at once to be generative -or open to regeneration - and to care is to affect a kind of carefreeness. Ruminating on the notion of `curiosity', Foucault likewise implicates caring with a kind of open-ended desire. `Curiosity', he claims, `… evokes "care"; it evokes the care one takes for what exists and what might exist; a sharpened sense of reality, but one that is never mobilized before it' (1988: 328). So whilst the `being-for the other' of Levinasian moral philosophy might appear to point to a voluntary self-limitation, paradoxically, this effacing of self also signals an opening of limits or horizons. For all the eschewal of balance or equilibrium, then, there is at least the potential of symmetry in any encounter where each party is a stranger to the other (see Derrida, 1978: 128, Shapiro, 1999: 80). And in this sense, the answering to the vulnerability of the other is at once an enactment of one's own susceptibilities to outside influence. As Pheng Cheah claims: `(i)t is precisely this internal vulnerability of any present being to alterity – its pregnancy with the movement of altering – that allows something to alter, change, or transform itself …or to be changed, transformed, or altered by another' (1999: 191).

Citizenship, Community and the Other
When it comes to environmental justice, to the question of fairness to distant and future others, then our best opportunity may be to operate through and out of the geopolitical spaces we currently occupy. In this way, we work with the resources made available by the citizenships we now enjoy, towards a more global environmental citizenship: one whose rough outlines can already been discerned in intergovernmental agreements, and in the international operations of non-governmental organizations and citizen's initiatives (see Dobson, 2000: 51). But alongside and amongst these imperatives, we have been suggesting, there is a place for another impetus to obligation: that of a caring and curious opening to vulnerable, and perhaps not so vulnerable, others. As Dobson has prudently put it `It is not that justice should be replaced by these other virtues, but that it should be supplemented by them, so as better to catch the requirements of citizenship in an ecological age' (2000: 46).

If this more `excessive' and  `exuberant' responsiveness is to provide a counterpoint to a panoptical management of ecological relations, we have proposed, there may be cause to move beyond the strict discrimination between problems created by our misdeeds, and wants that arise out of the natural vagaries of our planet. The summons of the other, in this way, exceeds the determinations of culpability. Such an enlarged notion of the `ecological' might serve to perturb our territorial sensibilities even more than the pursuit of global or trans-generational justice, for the a sense of the radical contingency of the biophysical world serves to underscore the still more transient and contingent status of our spatial claims and identity narratives (see Shapiro, 1999: 80). Just as the concern for non-human others helps `decentre' the human, it might be time also to decentre or downsize the role of the humanity in environmental change. This would

stand in marked contrast to the elevation of the human that inadvertently arises out of pronouncements that human agency has brought about an `end to nature' (see Giddens, 1994: 77; Beck, 1992: 81).

What seems to be required is a more nuanced understanding of our current position, which grasps at once our power to impact on aspects of the biosphere, and our own relative insignificance in the face of the totality of geophysical and biological processes. As Margulis reminds us: `the planet is not human, nor does it belong to humans. No human culture, despite its inventiveness, can kill life on this planet, were it even to try….We remain brazen, crass , and recent' (1998: 150, 160). Such sentiments, not yet the stuff of western social-scientific discourse or cultural narratives, might contribute toward a mode of global citizenship that is respectful of the vulnerabilities and potentialities of both human and non-human others. This sort of respect would hinge at once on an understanding that the biosphere is subject to dynamical variation, and on an acknowledgement that human activity has, in various ways, both smoothed out and exacerbated this variability.

Speculations of this sort, however, leave open the question of the kind of communities that might nurture the sensibilities we have been talking about. Despite talk of common concerns with the state of the planet and of the need to hear marginalized voices, there remain significant differences of perspective at all levels of the global `community' in terms of willingness to act, questions of responsibility and causes of environmental  change. For all the promise of international agreements and collaborations, global initiatives require the nurturing of `thicker' forms of cultural support and civic initiative. At the very least, what seems to be required are `energetic' civil societies which enable the full spectrum of voices to force issues and perspectives onto a public agenda. Our considerations of the `ecological' inevitability of dispersions and disseminations is a reminder of the invariably heterogeneous composition of communities. At the same time, the recognition that there are usually multiple others competing for any community's attention suggests an ongoing need for the sort of decisions and judgements that are bound to be divisive of host communities. In this regard, Iris Marion Young's recommendation that citizens should abandon the quest for consensus over the `good society' seems timely, for all that it runs against the grain of ecological ideals thus far (1990, 1996; see also Mouffe, 1993: 104).

Our arguments presuppose the emergence of new civic spaces that display openness to a range of narratives and identities beyond a zero sum game between market hedonism and ecological purity. The generation of communication between fragmented communities would require that traditional forms of progress be questioned, the 'Other' is allowed into the conversation, and that self-restraint is disconnected from Puritanism (Sachs 1999). Here we need to become aware that the citizen is both dependent upon common participation and the recovery of difference rather than diversity. Citizenship can only exist if there is space for engagement rather than confrontation, and allows expression of a multi-vocal community as opposed to the logics of the market and the state (Leca 1992). Citizenship in a post-socialist age needs to work within a world that lacks blue prints for an alternative social order, has witnessed the extension of claims for recognition from trees to tribal peoples, and is increasingly dominated by a shrinking state and neo-liberal economics (Fraser 1997).

In this context, rather than moralising about other people's pleasures we suggest that the environmental movement point to the ways industrialization has lead to the commodification of nature. The spectre of commodification has meant that the 'natural' has increasingly become privatised as a form of luxury consumption (Pred 1998, Katz 1998). Green politics needs to reconnect culture and nature in such a way that disrupts images and discourses of 'nature's' presumed innocence. The point where a politics of contact and becoming join a democratic politics would be the public space that is made available for competing and antagonistic narratives of the 'natural'. The deconstruction of simplistic oppositions between 'nature' and 'culture' are key in this regard. Undoubtedly this could only be achieved if democratic forms of citizenship protected minority voices and perspectives. The 'other' would need institutional and proceedural safe guards so as to empower perspectives that are usually lost in the search for 'consensus'. In this regard we need to think about new ways to consider Chantal Mouffe's admonition not to shrink from antagonism within our communal relations, but to search for ways to contain and redirect these hostilities (1993: 153).

To begin to think about the openness of our communal life not only to non human beings, but to the vicissitudes of climatic change and geo-physical upheaval is not just to ponder generativity, in a broadly ecological sense, but also to address frailty and mortality on grander scales than we may be accustomed to. As Derrida observes: `(t)he immortality and perfection of a living being would consist in it having no relation with any outside' (1981:101). If nothing else, the relations to `an outside', both corporeally and communally, that we have been tracking are reminders of the contingency, vulnerability and unfinished nature of the human, along with all other life. On an everyday level, the cultivation of such `ecological' sensibilities might involve the rethinking of communal rituals and practices involved with the rites of passage, birth, death and other `catastrophic' changes of state. For example, Michael Young and Lesley Cullen (1995) have suggested that to break with the individualisation of death would be to find a new role for the community and ritual within these processes. In an ecological age this would indeed need to link the individual to both the community and the cycles of life and death, catastrophe and regeneration which relate to our planet. The moment of death and the associated processes of mourning and loss would need to find a way for both communal and planetary identifications. In this respect, it is an awareness of our own common vulnerability that often enables humans to attend to the sufferings of

others. Yet such occasions can also be used to mark the vitality of the community – in its human and its broader ecological sense - which outlives the individual's passing.

Further, we might consider the way we understand illness. Psychotherapy teaches us of the possibility of finding strength within weakness. The 'good enough' therapeutic relationship allows the patient/client to become aware of their limits. In an age of rationalised health care it is worth reminding ourselves that the 'health' of the person undergoing treatment often depends upon a healing relation rather than any technique. It is dialogue that creates the possibility of self-criticism and thereby the recognition of our own limits (Gadamer 1996). The 'change' brought about by therapy and other healing relationships enable the patient to be able to recognise their own vulnerability and generative capacities along with connected others (Melucci 1996). The consideration of death and health in these terms, points to the fact that environmental concerns are connected to our relationships with ourselves and the community

At both this more intimate level, and in a broader sense, we have been attempting to link up contemporary environmental issues with an experience of vulnerability and suffering which `subsists on the underside of agency, mastery, wholeness, joy and comfort' (see Connolly: 1999: 125). In relation to the sort of ethic of care we have been talking about environmental discourse, as it now stands, is more strongly linked to the notion of justice. Ecological citizenship, we have been suggesting, needs both. However, while obligation linked to justice has a firm institutional foothold – particularly at the international level, we have suggested that it still struggles to gain a beachhead in the every day cultures of our modernity. A compassionate ethic of the encounter, with its more fragile and transient obligations, is more difficult to equate with transnational institutional arrangements, or any institutional arrangements, for that matter. But if the dimension of `becoming' is emphasized - the possibility of surprising and generative mutual transformations, then there is at least an opening to feed from and into existing cosmopolitan sensibilities, with their privileging of novel experience, thirst for difference and willingness to bypass conventional boundaries. While this presents certain challenges with regard to future generations of others, linking care with curiosity for `what exists and what might exist', in Foucault's sense, does suggest a clear orientation to the future. An ecological imagination that links care not only with the vulnerability of life - but with the exuberance that is the counterpart of this frailty – we have been arguing, might have a better chance at collective appeal than the calculating anti-hedonisms now on offer.

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