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Affordances: on Luminous Abodes and Ecological Reason

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Abstract

This is an essay on place in light of the ecological crisis as an exercise in what Pierre Charbonnier has recently called ecological reason, that is, “the environmental reflexivity of our species.” How do the roots of our prevailing political and economic relationships to the many lands that sustain us appear retroactively from the perspective of ecological reason? In a kind of tragic reversal, the mad rush to global prosperity and political dignity now appears as the emerging catastrophe of our failure to heed the terrestrial affordances that sustain us. I explicate this problem and root about for responses to it by lacing together the recent work of Charbonnier as well as John Sallis, Bruno Latour, and Brian Burkhardt in a single weave of place-specific thinking. How can we begin to rethink place from the ground up?

Keywords

place – John Sallis – Bruno Latour – Pierre Charbonnier – Brian Burkhardt – ecological reason

The late Cascadian sculptor, artist, poet, and thinker Tom Jay, reflecting on ground, dirt, earth, and soil as elemental aspects of place, challenged us to think place from the ground up:

We are all earth-born, literally and figuratively, and the word *human* confirms this assertion. Our words human, humble and homage all derived from the Latin *humus* (“earth, soil, ground, region, country”). A human is earth-born, shares the quality of humus. It is well to remember that to our ancestors humus was local and that “humanity” was born, arose from a specific locale, a place. The people over the hill might not be quite human, in the sense of your local humus. Our language knows we are earth-born even if we think we are heaven sent.¹

Our language still bears witness to a place-based sense of ourselves and our human nonhuman kin that is antithetical to our reigning global sensibility. What is strange, given the unfolding ecological catastrophe of our global political economy, is that such words still sound strange. How do we retrieve a sense of place when our species has tried to convince itself that it is at home everywhere when it is increasingly at home nowhere? And how do we do this when global modernity excludes an encounter with the humus that gives us our humanity, but has also largely abandoned most of the nonhuman members of our abode, as if we had no relatives other than some of our own species? And how is such a realization obscured by the delusional and criminal assumptions that animate the recent resurgence of authoritarian, fascist, and quasi-fascist anti-global, nation-first thinking?

In what follows, I lace together the recent work of John Sallis, Bruno Latour, Pierre Charbonnier, and Brian Burkhart in a single weave of place-specific thinking from the perspective of the pervading ecological, political, and economic crisis. How can we begin to rethink place from the ground up?

1 Abiding with Elemental Luminosity

In the brilliant culmination to his trilogy on the elemental imagination, *Ethicality and Imagination: On Luminous Abodes*,² John Sallis gestures toward the catastrophic global interruption of the ecological ceiling that shelters the many abodes that sustain, in their various affordances, the current patterns of life on earth. This is not a pause in an otherwise happy story, but rather the

1 Tom Jay, “Land, Earth, Soil, Dirt: Some Notes Towards a Sense of Place,” *Cascadian Zen: Bioregional Writings on Cascadia Here and Now*, Paul E. Nelson, Jason M. Wirth, Adelia MacWilliam, with Theresa Whitehill, eds. (Seattle: Watershed Press, 2023), 197.

2 John Sallis, *Ethicality and Imagination: On Luminous Abodes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022). Henceforth EI.

return of the repressed. “Humans live in the midst of nature, and nature is the ultimate source of all the things necessary for the maintenance of human life. Destructive comportment to nature thus undermines the very conditions of life, as attested most powerfully by the destructive return of nature” (EI, 112). The destructive comportment to nature externalizes it, relegating it to a mere backdrop to human striving. Rather than establishing strong limits to human self-determination, nature becomes a resource for humans to dispose of as they please. Such subjugation fosters the delusion that humans are in control, that they can take possession of their places. In the end, as the tragic reversal of the Anthropocene attests, the human yearning for autonomy triggers the destructive reassertion of nature’s own autonomy.

In his recent work, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*,³ the late Bruno Latour makes a similar claim about the destructive and unavoidable reassertion of the terrestrial conditions whose various affordances render life as we know it possible:

Formally, it was possible to say that humans were on earth or in nature, that they found themselves in the modern period and that they were humans more or less responsible for their actions. One could distinguish between physical geography and human geography as if it were a matter of two layers, one superimposed upon the other. But how can we say where we are if the place on or in which we are located begins to react to our actions, turns against us, encloses us, dominates us, demands something of us and carries us along its path? (DE, 41)

As Pierre Charbonnier has argued in his watershed work, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*,⁴ immense political energy and violence have been spent on bringing the various affordances of the earth under our beck and call, with the promise, however disingenuous, that human autonomy will universally prevail over our ecological ceiling. Modernity was the promise that human autonomy, liberated by abundance, would triumph over the land’s autonomy.

As Sallis, Latour, and Charbonnier acknowledge, each in their own way: the places or abodes of nature have not been silenced, reduced to mere engineering challenges and storehouses of resources, but rather have returned with a

3 Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity, 2018). Henceforth DE.

4 Pierre Charbonnier, *Affluence and Freedom: An Environmental History of Political Ideas*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity, 2021). Henceforth AF.

fury as political actors. The political and economic dreams of humanity are confronting the earth's backlash. Indeed, this is a kind of tragic reversal:⁵ we thought that we had finally liberated global progress and improvement from its natural bondage, only to confront the decimation of our living conditions.

This allows us think in a new light not only the luminous abodes of the earth and their respective affordances, but also nature and the earth as such. Economic globalization, and the perpetual growth upon which it is predicated, have failed to deliver their promise. The wealthy are no longer even pretending that they are going to share the affluence that underwrites their self-determination. As Latour cheekily characterized the current position of the global elite: "Our history will no longer have anything to do with yours; you can go to hell!" (DE, 4). This is not simply the impossible spatial distribution of abundance – the earth is too limited for endless growth and extraction – but also a temporal problem. We are running out of time. We are already seeing an intensification of climatic disturbances (mega-fires, more frequent and intense droughts, flooding rains, supercharged hurricanes and typhoons, rising seas, the acceleration of the extinction event, etc.), and two-degree Celsius average climate change or worse is imminent. Imagining that we can have permanent growth by replacing fossil fuels with sustainable forms of energy is also disingenuous. There may be plenty of wind and solar energy, but the materials that make turbines and batteries are finite.

Globalization is faced with the prospect of involuntary degrowth willy-nilly. Our global political-economic infrastructure will collapse if we remain grossly impaired in our capacity to reimagine other modes of flourishing together. For many it is still easier to imagine ecological collapse than an alternative to late capitalism. Globalization as universally shared prosperity, peace, and freedom, however delusional that aspiration may have been, now confronts a new and largely unexpected manifestation of the global. As Latour observes: "The new universality consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way" (DE, 9).

This free-fall currently presents, as Charbonnier argues, two unsavory but widespread options: religious millennialism (we are doomed!) or desperate recourse to "survival and adaptation" (AF, 207). If we are going to avoid either annihilation or the grim world of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, we need to reconsider radically a "new bioeconomic foundation" (AF, 207). In his own way, Latour announces "our only way out: discovering in common what land is

5 Charbonnier: "they shed a tragic light on the way that political and ecological conditions are intimately linked, and subject to joint transformations" (AF, 8).

inhabitable and with whom to share it" (DE, 9). How to rethink our luminous abodes beyond the twin perils of collapse and grim survivalism?

Such a task requires what Charbonnier felicitously (and with a nod toward a reworking of Kantian critical philosophy) calls *ecological reason*, that is, "the environmental reflexivity of our species." In the deployment of such a practice of reason, the environment "is less an object than a point of view: the ecological analyst demonstrates his or her versatility by focusing on any social doctrine and reconstructing its relevance from their relationships to the material environment that are seen as possible or impossible" (AF, 16). How does the history of the rise of the global political economy (the many abodes of the earth gathered together, often violently) appear in the light of ecological reason? How do the luminous abodes manifest in the hindsight of the ecological crisis?

From the retroactive deployment of ecological reason, these luminous abodes can also be thought of as affordances. The term was first coined in 1979 by James J. Gibson⁶ to describe the modes of behavior that a particular place renders possible, the complementarity between an animal and its place. "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (TA, 127). For example, if a surface is flat and not too high off the ground, it affords sitting for humans (TA, 128). Air affords respiration (TA, 130). The affordance of a place is similar to an ecological "niche," speaking not to *where* an animal lives (its habitat), but rather to *how* it lives (TA, 128). The radicality of this position was not lost on Gibson because an affordance implies the possibility of *perceiving both value and meaning in an abode* (TA, 127).

Pierre Charbonnier extends the concept of an ecological affordance to include its political affordance, by which "we mean the materials that the nature of the land offers to the political and legal imaginary" (AF, 31). Ecological reason recasts the modern globalizing history of political-economy as political ecology. How does the latter appear, including the persistence and acceleration of global inequality, from the perspective of the ecological crisis? The political economic problem of extending the affordances of the land so that they are more favorable to human striving (for, alas, only *some* humans) is reconsidered from the vantage point of its subsequent ecological repercussions. What does the triumph of the human will to affluence and self-determination – I want to live in an 'on demand' world – ruinously obscure about our relationship to our luminous abodes?

6 James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1979), 127–137. Henceforth TA.

For Sallis, it deludes us about the ἦθος (*ethos*), the place-based root of ethicality, of the ongoing disclosure of the affordances of an abode:

Human abidance is not only a matter of presence, of simply being present in an abode, of passively occupying it. Rather, as the word suggests, to inhabit an abode is also to bode something (or, in the obsolete form, to abode it). It is to portend, to foresee, to be attuned to what is promised in one's abidance – as when one says of something that it bodes well. In other words, to inhabit an abode is also to be engaged by and in possible disclosure within the abode. Within the spiraling circle of an abode, one abides portentously, disclosively. Abidance entails openness to disclosure. (EI, 43–44)

To abide in an abode requires that one not close oneself to “what is promised in one's abidance” in the ongoing disclosure of its affordances. This is not possible if one unilaterally imposes oneself upon an abode, producing a form of habitation that more resembles theft (taking what is not given or disclosed). In the latter, one surveys one's surroundings, seeing what might be of value, scouting the land for what can be brought to market. The “discovery” of the Redwoods, for example, was an opportunity for material abundance derived from logging. Even when awe-inspiring stands of Redwoods were spared, they were relic stands preserved as tourist museums rather than robust ecosystems. As Gary Snyder quipped about this kind of relationship to the land: “People live on it without knowing what it is or where they are. They live on it literally like invaders.”⁷ They do not submit to measure, which for Sallis “entails its being what it is, in contrast to one whose character diverges from what the person is given to understand as himself” (EI, 75).

The Anthropocene in this respect can be understood as nature remeasuring the measures imposed upon it. In the global order, the earth is remeasured to a human scale, but in so doing, humans have precipitated its political fury.

2 The Third Vector

In speaking of the abodes of the earth, even in the catastrophic universality of the ecological and economic free-fall, we are not simply speaking within the purview of a particular abode, but rather speaking of that abode's relationship

⁷ Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews & Talks 1964–1979*, ed. William Scott McLean (New York: New Directions, 1980), 69.

to other abodes and to the earth and even the cosmos. Sallis extends the field that transcends the singularities of an abode to the almost unimaginable reaches of the cosmos as well as the similarly obscure depths of the earth and the force of the other elemental forces that both comprise and exceed our abodes. The latter reinforce a sense of the refuge as an abode: they both highlight the enabling elements from which it also provides shelter and the wonder that this excess engenders. An abode, furthermore, is not only open to its excesses, but also to other abodes. To think an abode is to think both from the singularities of place and what Sallis calls the “the dynamic configuration of abodes.” Disclosure within and without an abode, for their radical incongruity, nonetheless releases “a space that, on the one side, exceeds the human indefinitely and, on the other side, provides humans with sites of habitation, of wonder, of refuge. These two configurations, taken together in their bearing on the reflective self, constitute *ethicality*” (EI, 74).

The ethicality of abidance in the affordances of an abode holds together in their tension the ongoing disclosure of locality and its openness to what exceeds locality. A locality has both a depth that stokes wonder and openness, and a sense that a locality is both singular yet interrelated in a nest of abodes. This is the fold of community itself, both the community within an abode and its nest:

Community is thus set within the compass of the two configurations that constitute ethicality, that of the proper elementals and that of the nest of abodes. As abiding in one’s community, it is incumbent – is indeed an imperative – that one appropriate to one’s full capacity the reflected elemental self-understanding as it bears on one’s being-in-community and that one become ever more visionary in looking out beyond – yet from within – one’s community. It is in this way that, as abiding in one’s community, one enters into enhanced ethicality and at the same time furthers the ethical composure of one’s community at large. (EI, 92)

Bruno Latour also attempts to hold together the inseparable yet irresolvable ecological tension between the local and the global. This can be seen in the resolve of the financial elite, as we have seen, to stop pretending that they are going to share the affluence of the ecologically wounded political economy with the mass of humanity that has been engaged in the mad dash toward modernization. The indicators are abundant: deregulation and the demonization of the so-called globalists, highly capitalized campaigns to deny climate change (or least confuse people about it), rampant economic inequality, the rise of authoritarian regimes that play the confidence game of being “populist”

and “anti-elite” while concentrating the wealth and power of those that they claim to oppose, and the many symbolic “gated communities” that keep the rabble at bay. The rich know that the Titanic is doomed, but “they reserve the lifeboats for themselves and ask the orchestra to go on playing lullabies so they can take advantage of the darkness to beat their retreat before the ship’s increased listing alerts the other classes!” (DE, 19). They work to “dismantle the ideology of a planet shared by all” (DE, 21).

As the ship of modernity sinks, the dream of globalization is the tragic reversal that reveals the nightmare of globalization. As we saw with the nest of abodes, the problem is not with the relationship of the local and the global, but rather with the ruinous way that this relationship was misconstrued, its betrayal of ethicality. “Shifting from a local to a global viewpoint,” Latour contends, “ought to mean multiplying viewpoints, registering a greater number of varieties, taking into account a larger number of beings, cultures, phenomena, organisms, and people” (DE, 12–13). Latour calls this still unfulfilled promise *globalization plus* in order to distinguish it from the revelation of the nightmare of *globalization minus*. The latter, at the heart of the global crisis of place, was global in reach, but only in order to serve violently the interests of a few. “A single vision, entirely provincial, proposed by a few individuals, representing a very small number of interests, limited to a few measuring instruments, to a few standards and protocols, has been imposed on everyone and spread everywhere” (DE, 13). So fundamental is the difference between *globalization plus* and *globalization minus* that it both transforms the modern project of political economy into the contemporary demand for political ecology and stipulates that the key political ecological task of today is mending what globalization minus has wounded. One is either a Mender and Healer or an Extractor and Hoarder.

The damage of *globalization minus* is prodigious. Most all localities came to see themselves as backwards, quaint, anthropologically curious, primitive, and in need of modernization, and hence “any attachment to any soil at all has been read as a sign of backwardness” (DE, 14). What was lost, however, should not be confused with a nostalgia for local insularity, closed and non-negotiable communities that imagine that their interests were the only ones that mattered. *Globalization minus* was, after all, the universal conquest of world on behalf of the narrow economic agenda of the *local minus* of imperial Europe. Latour counters this movement with his own version of *think globally, act locally*: “The planet is *much too narrow and limited* for the globe of globalization; at the same time, it is *too big*, infinitely too large, too active, too complex, to remain within the narrow and limited borders of any locality whatsoever” (DE, 16).

The nest of luminous abodes is the art of thinking *local plus* as *global-plus* and vice-versa.

Latour delineates four vectors, that is, the four different “attractors” that are pulling the places of the earth. The first, as we have just seen, is *globalization minus*, as local singularities are abandoned in favor of the homogeneity of an unequally shared but compulsory global political economy. What happens, however, when “the pole of attraction drawing us with the force of self-evidence, pulling the whole world in its direction, becomes a counter force that pushes us away, leaving us with the confused feeling that only a few will profit from it?” (DE, 30). The lost local becomes the second attractor, and a reactionary vector emerges in resistance to *globalization minus*. The modern world has become an oxymoron. “Either it is modern, but has no world under its feet, or else it is a true world, but will not be modernizable” (DE, 32). Fleeing the free-fall of the modern world, however, the local, for all its attraction, has been lost. One cannot put the genie back in the bottle. One cannot simply go home again. We are torn consequently between the two attractors, increasingly unable to abide in the delusion that the world can be modern, yet hardly able to return to abandoned localities. Neither vector provides for dwelling on earth.

Rather than homelessly going back and forth, we need to break out and step sideways. One dangerous way to break out of the polarization of the lost local and the uninhabitable *global minus*, however, is an emerging fourth vector, driven by its “out-of-this-world” attractor. The rise of right wing anti-global authoritarian regimes who promise autocratically to provide what globalization failed to provide are evidence of a burgeoning irreality. Make America Great Again behind a wall! And let’s do this as we burn fossil fuels and send greenhouse gases all over the world! This obfuscation enables its surreptitious grift: “no longer having to share with others a world that they know will never again be a common world” (DE, 36). Trump’s scam, for example, is to promise the flourishing of the local in order to steal what remains, just as the global elite strike up the band on the Titanic to distract the globalized masses while the elite steal the lifeboats. “Trump presides over the country that had the most to lose from a return to reality. Its material infrastructures are the most difficult to reorient quickly; its responsibilities and the current climactic situation are the most crushing” (DE, 38). We find ourselves suspended in irreality between the first and second vectors in the nowhere land of the fourth vector. The modern invention of the nation-state belongs to these three vectors, and it too testifies to our global spatial alienation, the self-serving abstractions that delude us about our abodes.

The final possibility is a third vector that bisects the first and the second while avoiding the fourth. Latour endows it with a tentative name: the “terrestrial” (DE, 40). Here the *geo* in geopolitics is now an actor and no longer a background figure. “But how can we say where we are if the place on or in which we are located begins to react to our actions, turns against us, encloses us, dominates us, demands something of us and carries us along its path?” (DE, 41). This is the political ecology of the *local plus* (the many luminous abodes) in tension with the *global plus* (the ethicality of the nest of abodes), as it attempts to come back down to earth and respond to Sallis’s “destructive return of nature.”

The third vector, the critical political ecological task of our time, is not a reactionary return to, or a *sehnsuchtig* yearning for, a lost homeland. There is no going back, and the destructive return of nature is *utterly unprecedented*, even for indigenous communities who have admirably managed to repel to some measure the violent draw of modernity. Indigenous communities, having maintained a living relationship to their luminous abodes, are also confronting the emergence of the earth itself as the major political actor of our time. “I belong to a territory’ has changed meaning: it now designates the agency that possesses the possessor!” (DE, 42).

The third vector consequently requires a rethinking of the uses to which we put science. The great indigenous philosopher Vine Deloria, Jr. argued that the problem with western science was not science itself, but the immaturity and lack of wisdom with which its enormous power is wielded. In a more complex and comprehensive fashion, indigenous cultures had their own variations on Gibson’s affordance and its capacity to perceive, at least with a lot of hard work and strenuous searching, both value and meaning in an abode. Deloria argued that this did not assume “the idea that knowledge existed apart from human beings and their communities and could stand alone for ‘its own sake.’”⁸ The locality of the land afforded not mere abstractions, but primarily value and meaning, so that one can “find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person’s life, individuals were supposed to walk” (SR, 46). Latour recognizes the power of such cultures, so long as we do not forget that they, too, are facing an unprecedented challenge (DE, 44). Although we have radical lessons to learn from indigenous cultures, and other ecological forces of decoloniality, the exigency of thinking from and toward the third vector is in the end a challenge for us all.

8 Vine Deloria, Jr., “If You Think About It, You Will See that It Is True,” *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, ed. Barbera Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta (Wheat Ridge, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 44. Henceforth SR.

Nonetheless, we need to liberate ourselves from science's "sadistic asceticism" (DE, 69), its "view from Sirius" in which the earth is just a planet among planets.⁹ This should not be confused with Sallis's cosmological turn, which imbues an abode with wonder. For Latour, while the near monopoly of the view from Sirius is perfectly good science, it is an "external" view (DE, 68). An overreliance on it fails to recognize adequately the internal view that the nested abodes of the earth within their current climatic regime are our *only* homes. Sallis's powerful cosmological turn in this context both opens up the infinite externality of a luminous abode while simultaneously bringing into relief the capacity of an abode to shelter and nurture human and non-human life. Latour, rejecting the incipient politics that govern science's self-insistence that it is somehow apolitical, argues that in the dawning of the third vector, "we need sciences, but *positioned differently*" (DE, 74). Just as Deloria was advocating for the locality of wisdom (and not imputing preferences or wishful thinking), the third vector demands that the *sang-froid* of science engage the local-global heat of the moment in the living intimacy of its localities. "It is essential to acquire as much cold-blooded knowledge as possible about the *heated* activity of an earth finally grasped *from up-close*" (DE, 74).

We can also see in passing that this eschewal of the external and lifeless perspective on science allows us to appreciate the prescient and seminal contribution of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in a new light. Schelling did not criticize science for being science but was rather concerned with what early science valorized. Science recognized neither the vitality nor the value of what it studied. When Schelling claimed in his celebrated 1809 *Freedom* essay, for instance, that "nature is not present" to modernity because it "lacks a living ground,"¹⁰ he sensed that the ethical illness of scientific culture's hubris would be catastrophic. The demand for a science that is also rooted in the wisdom of the third vector largely bears him out over two centuries later.

The force of this realization renders political economics (modernity) ruinous while giving rise to political ecology as our third vector task. In his startling final work, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*,¹¹ Latour argues that the global lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic reaffirms that we are always living in a lockdown. We are bound to the luminous abodes whose affordances

9 See also Latour's revelatory Gifford Lectures on climate change, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Medford, MA: Polity, 2017).

10 "Die Natur für sich nicht vorhanden ist, und daß es ihr am lebendigen Grunde fehlt." F. W. J. Schelling, *Schellings Werke: Nach der Originalausgabe in neuer Anordnung*, ed. Manfred Schröter (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1927), division one, volume seven, 361.

11 Bruno Latour, *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*, trans. Julie Rose (Medford, MA: Polity, 2021). Henceforth AL.

form and maintain us. There was never really an escape, despite the global refashioning of the Anthropocene. We deny this and remain “Extractors” or we respond to this and as “Menders” work on the restoration of our abodes. This is the fundamental conflict of our time (AL, 115). Or as he articulated it earlier, “Do we continue to nourish dreams of escaping, or do we start seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit? ... this is what divides us all” (AE, 5).

3 Ecological Reason

Latour argues that the political ecology of the third vector enables a reconsideration of the relationship between the social and the earth, obliging “us to *reopen the social question* while *intensifying* it through the new geopolitics.” This is “the *new geo-social question*” (DE, 63). This is also the question that animates Charbonnier’s political economy as it tries to articulate the historical roots of the need for a new social ecology.

Using the critical lens of ecological reason, Charbonnier reinterprets in great detail the modern rise of political economy as it attempts to contest and renegotiate the affordances of its lands. Although his provocative revisioning of European imperial and colonial history is too nuanced and complex to summarize adequately here, I touch on some of its salient details.

The subjugation of our ecological affordances in order to produce abundance cannot be separated from the still-celebrated political virtues of modernity like human rights, the rule of law, and the mastery of nature so that we are no longer subject to its yolk, but can rather live autonomously, freely self-determining our individualistic lives. In times of ecological duress and scarcity, we value mutual aid and cooperation, not individual self-determination. Without wealth, radical individuality is unwise. Affluence makes atomistic freedom, protected by the security and property and human rights of national governments, the dream of modernity. “We thought that what mattered was winning the right to enjoy the world and its riches as equals, under the protection of a just state” (AF, 7).

But how did we ever think that we could turn the corner on the relentlessly limiting ecological affordance of European abodes? Trade was long the answer, and early modernity witnessed the accelerated protection of the open seas and terrestrial trade routes. Since there are limits to what a particular abode can produce, trade enables the exchange for goods that can be produced elsewhere. John Locke’s now notorious defense of appropriating lands without consent further extended local affordances. By improving what turned out to be faraway land with one’s labor, one appropriated it. Of course, Europeans

could not appropriate European lands in this way nor was there any effort to teach indigenous peoples to farm or any recognition of longstanding indigenous agricultural practices. This was a land-grab. Indigenous peoples were demoted to hunter-gatherers (AF, 46), and “it was enclosure that materialized someone’s practical grip on a plot of land” (AF, 45). The rise of “property,” however, meant the rise of the state as the protector of property, and the affluence of the rising property-class rendered self-determination desirable.

Already one can discern a hint of the vexing relationship between the material substratum of self-determination and the promise of the universal distribution and protection of autonomy. This uneasy alliance between wealth (overriding local affordances) and self-determination (acting as we please, not as nature dictates) is a throughline in modernity. We imagine that we are no longer subject to nature’s affordances and that everyone can and should be free. Yet how could this ever happen if affluence is built on the labor, lands, and resources of the ‘uncivilized,’ the not yet ‘modernized,’ and the working poor (in all its enforced intersectional racial, class, and gender imbalances)? For Charbonnier, the pursuit of autonomy through affluence raises a “terrifying question. To what extent is the political autonomy of Western nations, as a project but also to the extent that it has been partly achieved, dependent on these asymmetries of power and knowledge? Is autonomy something you buy, a luxury that you can afford when you illegally profit from the riches of others?” (AF, 87).

This question and its position within the critical purview of ecological reason also allows us to understand the infamous tension between Adam Smith and Karl Marx in a new light. We still speak of the former as a proponent of “Smithian” or “intensive” growth because in 1776 when *The Wealth of Nations* first appeared, he could not imagine that we could transcend our ecological ceiling. The division of labor (the time-saving dexterity of simple repetitive factory tasks and the use of machines) made labor far more efficient, at the cost, as Marx saw, of the alienation and humiliation of the proletariat. Agriculture, for example, provided similar (and modest) financial yields all over the earth. Charbonnier understands Smith’s innovations as a “resistance to lack” not as “the conquest of infinite resources” (AF, 63). True extensive growth, that is, growth that can ignore the ecological ceiling of an abode, rather than growth that becomes more efficient (exploitative) within it, only emerges with the burning of fossil fuels, what Andreas Malm memorably called fossil capital. This was the real game-changer, and Malm also argued for a position akin to Charbonnier’s claim that the inability to distribute autonomy universally is hardwired into our reliance on fossil fuels. Malm: “Climate change has come about because a fortunate few have appropriated the bulk of the atmospheric

carbon sink through massive emissions *which by definition cannot be extended to humanity as a whole.*"¹²

Marx straddles the two poles of this dilemma (the affluence that makes autonomy possible and the inequality of its distribution). His invaluable contribution to our social legacy includes his unrelenting demand that autonomy be universally distributed (a classless society), but, like many leftist thinkers in his wake, he did not fully confront the problem of affluence. In the call for the universal distribution of autonomy, Marx still assumes, at least in his published writings, that we have solved or can solve the material conditions for the requisite abundance to underwrite freedom. The proletarian revolution is a social form of "extraction-economy" (AF, 87), made possible by an unsustainable reliance on coal. As the comparatively conservative economist William Stanley Jevons admitted in his 1865 *The Coal Question*, the finite supply of coal means that England has "to make the momentous choice between brief greatness and longer continued mediocrity" (quoted in AF, 81). It turned out that this brief greatness could be extended by taking the coal of other nations, and then by the supernova of petroleum, but that is simply to postpone the inevitability of exhausting the supply of fossil fuels or any other non-renewable source of energy.

For Marx, "the conquest of emancipation takes place against the political forces generated by industry, but on the same technological and material bases which previously fostered them" (AF, 144). In dismantling the structures of capitalism, Marx preserves their underlying force. "It lays bare the effort that must be made by human society to adapt to the conditions of existence that it is itself putting in place, in other words the Anthropocene, an effort that must culminate in the abolition of capitalist *forms*, the only way to preserve their *force*, i.e., affluence finally reconciled with autonomy" (AF, 155).

The rise of oil in greasing the Great Acceleration of post-world-war-globalization sends this vector into hyperdrive. The burning of petroleum seemed finally to externalize the ecological affordances of our abodes. It was in principle possible to live as we see fit, and the hope of universally distributing this freedom was a matter of choosing which side of the Cold War could best deliver it. When a thinker as admirable as Herbert Marcuse imagined the creative human world after it had been liberated from capitalism, he did not recognize that such dreams assume the affluence of a world energized by petroleum. We can at last have a free life separated from servility to our needs.

12 Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York and London: Verso, 2016), 391.

“Let us be clear: no society other than advanced industrial capitalism has ever made such a definition of liberty possible (or, let us say, conceivable)” (AF, 179). We can see that Charbonnier’s ecological critique of the great Marcuse extends to many of the stalwarts in the Continental philosophical tradition. For example, Sartre’s demand that we extend the material conditions of our a priori freedom (*Existentialism as a Humanism, Critique of Dialectical Reason*, etc.) is oblivious to the ecological precarity of those conditions. Even Heidegger’s “other beginning,” with its rich and often attractive ecological overtones, lacks the resources to respond to “peak oil.”

Charbonnier’s ecological critique sheds additional light on some of the other possible features of a third vector political ecology. If the Left has preserved the social promise of modernity, it must rethink such a hope from the ground up, abode by luminous abode, both locally (in the terms of each abode) and globally (in the nest of abodes). This is, to use Sallis’s forceful naming, the ethicality of the earth, for humans and non-humans. Charbonnier’s social ecology demands the termination of both the “modern exception” and the “exteriorization of nature” in which “the autonomy of some people has been linked to the heteronomy of others” and in “how the ecological burden of modern improvement was passed over in silence at the same time as the epistemological apparatus was being constructed, allowing us to convince ourselves of the silent objectivity of environments and territories” (AF, 212). Charbonnier calls this the “symmatrization” (AF, 210) of the social (no longer based on the wealth of a few at the expense of the poverty of the many) and the ecological (affordances no longer understood as conquered or vincible). As such, the task of political ecology is “the self-protection of the earth” (AF, 258). Political ecology is the earth protecting herself through our response to the complex legacy of affluence and freedom.

This is also the case for Latour’s own account of the third vector, which eschews “weightless freedom” for “emancipation through a process of plowing” (DE, 81). Freedom is the art of the lockdown, of flourishing not in our autonomy, but in the creativity of our dependency and the engendering distribution of our humanity within the many interdependent abodes whose affordances foster us.

4 Conclusion: from the Ground Up

In his marvelous intervention, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous*

Futures,¹³ Brian Burkhart, one of Vine Deloria's students, evokes the trickster figure of Iktomi, the spider whose self-involved antics allow us to recognize suddenly our tacitly operating self-importance as we "float free from the land" (IP, xii). These stories can also open space within the colonial appropriation of the land and its lamination of self-serving assumptions that obscure the power of the land. In the delocality of settler coloniality, which obscures and renders unintelligible the power of land, Iktomi "allows the listener to hear something that cannot be meaningfully said directly, at least in the conceptual and semantic context of delocality" (IP, 180).

Burkhart's use of Iktomi exposes the anthropocentric bias in how we think about place and its nonhuman inhabitants. By centering dignity and intrinsic value in the absolute value of a human being, for instance, the best we can do is distribute by analogy such value to other human-like forms of life. Perhaps we can grant dignity to our pets, and to highly intelligent animals, but even if we extend such value to the whole animal kingdom, we quickly run up to the limit of this strategy. Even a vegan has to eat and so the vegetable world, unlike the animal world, ends up having instrumental value. Cancer cells and deadly viruses are forms of life. And we still have no idea what to make of Chief Seattle's claim that everything is sacred, and his two examples of this principle, namely, rocks and soil.

In using the Iktomi stories to flush out the Iktomi inclination in us all, it becomes possible to think value and meaning in the affordances of local abodes. In citing the Cayuse Young Chief's refusal to sign a particular treaty, for example, Burkhart notes that no one had conferred with the land itself. As Young Chief proclaimed, "The ground says ... it was from me that man was made. The Great Spirit, in placing men on earth, desired them to take good care of the ground" (quoted in IP, 89). Unlike the foibles of the self-obsessed Iktomi, the Spider Grandmother stories display the weave of all things, the "deep but precarious interconnection of all things" (IP, 193). The sacrality of all things is the web of which all things are a part, but which has no center. It is a question of kinship with all things within and without an abode, not an Iktomi-species making itself the measure of all value and meaning.

Connectedness or continuity is what gives a thing value. The amount of value that a thing has is not determined by its place on the web. In order for this to be the case, there would have to be a center: something that

13 Brian Burkhart, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019). Henceforth IP.

determines, perhaps by distance of connection, the value of the other items on the web. But this centering of things and so of values requires delocality. (IP, 203–204)

In this respect, we can say that third vector terrestrial thinking from luminous abodes cannot be administered from on high. Top-down imposition of order requires the same detachment that is at the heart of the political-ecological crisis. Rather we start from the luminosity of the terrestrial, that is, from what Burkhart calls “bottom-up continuity or unity”:

In the context of the creating of a just and sustainable polity, part of the idea seems to be that there can be no top down structure of governance, for example, since this would be to determine what is right for our community not on the basis of this individual variation, the always already being in motion of the community, but by something much narrower and in the end exclusionary regarding the individuals. (IP, 238)

This is to become what Burkhart associates with the Children of the Corn: “a way of seeing the community as like a single organism made up of the people who are mere pieces of that organism. The people are not parts that can function on their own, but are pieces of the whole (the community) and need it to live” (IP, 239–240).

But what in the meantime to do with the political economy that resists the turn to the political ecology of the sacred webs within and without our luminous (Sallis) and sacred (Chief Seattle) abodes? How do we even begin to name the terrestrial Menders who are orphans in the realm of the current governing institutions? Perhaps they are, in the sense extolled by thinkers like Kropotkin, communal anarchists, but with a more clear-eyed ecological vision. As Latour mused:

What can we call people who are stateless, who have no homeland, because they want to insert the terrestrial homeland, or better still the mother terrestrial homeland, into the definitions of their own countries? ‘Anarchists’? Yes, because they reject the borders of the state where they were born. ‘Socialists’? If you like, but how do we insert the lichens and forests and rivers, the humus and this eternal bloody CO₂ in the old notion of society? (AL, 113)

This is the hope for social ecology that symmetrizes the ecological and the social in the degrowth of the prevailing world order. Perhaps the hope for an

awakening to the luminous abodes that we share with all beings, is just a hope, but it is not a hope based on a delusion. As the poet Jane Hirshfield in the concluding stanza of “Manifest” from her new collection, *The Asking*, phrased it:

Leave one unfraudulent hope,
one affection like curtains blown open in wind,
whose minutes, seconds, fragrance,
choices,
won't sadden the heart to recall.¹⁴

14 Jane Hirshfield, “Manifest,” *The Asking: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2023), 7.