

No Place like Home: Ecological Destruction and Loss of Knowing in Late Modernity

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This thesis is dedicated to

Mary Frances Gray,

who now does lay,

like one day,

we all will

beneath the ground

so quiet,

beneath the ground

so still.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Megan Jaceglav

Abstract

This thesis argues that our culture is grounded in fundamental ontological error. This error posits human being as a form of being that is separate from the other-than-human world, its mortal and fleshy confines. Drawing on the insight of Gregory Bateson, I propose that insofar as ontology and epistemology are inextricably entwined, error in one implies error in the other. Thus the consequence of our faulty ontology is that epistemological error is built into the system.

The danger of systemic epistemological error is that, as a culture, we rely on our ways of knowing to find solutions to cultural/social/ecological problems. Yet where our ways of knowing are themselves erroneous, recourse to these, simply further perpetuates problems and at the same time deepens error. This is particularly the case where recourse to systemic correctives to such error have been lost – where ethical knowing (at the level of culture) and a perspective giving and defining relationship with nature and the sacred are not available to the system. Where these correctives are not available, the dominant knowing multiplies, a spreading pandemic across the landscape, suppressing and eradicating other ways of knowing and thus, other ways of being. A key result of this is the diminishing capacity, at the level of culture, to detect this epistemological (and ontological) error. The norm quickly overwrites difference, removing alternative knowing from the system. This has resulted in a condition in late modernity whereby the separation of ways of knowing and being from embeddedness in place are all but undetected in our cultural psyche.

Ecological and epistemological destruction thus continue fundamentally unchecked. This thesis traces the loss of awareness of loss through shifts in, what I term, the epistemological baseline. An overlooked dimension of this ecological and epistemological change is the impact that loss of knowing has on the self. This loss, has, I propose, produced a collective and heightened existential anxiety, a loss of the sense that the self in any meaningful way exists. As a result, the late-modern self is caught in the endless search for proof – looking for evidence of existence through the given cultural form - material reflections, particularly images, of the self. Such evidence, however, merely reproduces the search for, and the dominance of, ‘objective’ knowledge and the reign of the object, ultimately producing the impermeable self.

This process of self-referencing has over the last thirty to forty years been a matter of some theoretical scrutiny. Yet this conversation is one that has, primarily, been separated from conversations surrounding ecological destruction and diminished relationship with the other-than-human world. The making and mapping of the self is seen to bear no inherent relation to the destruction of species and of place. Where a connection is made it is material. Further, this is a materiality that is stripped bare of all subjectivity and presence. Hence we find most of the mainstream discourse and much environmental and cultural theory linking our habits of consumption to ideas of unsustainability but not to the effects this has on ways of being or knowing oneself as human. In this, the other-than-human world as the core constituent of our human being, (and our potential to know of this being) is absent, forgotten, lost.

In revealing the limitations of cultural and environmental theory and protest, due to their historical locatedness in (and thus tendency to reproduce) epistemological error, I draw attention to the way in which ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity are caught in a self-reinforcing, positive feedback loop which is taking us towards *epistemological* crisis. In this crisis we are trapped in a systemic failure to know of error and thus a failure to know otherwise, and as a system, we are heading not towards recovery but death.

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Introduction

This thesis began a long time ago. It began when I rolled around delighted, in the cold, fresh snow, smelling its skyfulness, relishing its texture, shaping it into firm, pliant balls, to delightedly throw at my sister. It began when I, half the size of our Old English sheepdog Rachel, wrapped my arms around her woolly neck, united in safety, trust, togetherness. It began in my Nanna's kitchen helping her make a weekly batch of chocolate chip cookies, patiently, methodically, with care. It continued, when, wrenched from New Zealand, I found myself studying philosophy at a West Australian university, asking questions about the nature of being. It moved forth, while, in seeking reprieve from my mind, the crowded, colliding space of ideas, and needing to get back in touch with the wide open skies, the breathing earth that I loved, the place where I felt grounded and connected, my life suitably in scale, I wandered, packing around Australia, Asia and Europe, traipsing towards homefulness, towards clarity, towards being. It took an important step forward when, arriving back on West Australian shores in 2000, I had the good fortune of stumbling upon a post graduate course that synthesised these parts of my world – of all our worlds – mind, place and being. This was a course called Eco-philosophy and Earth Education, a key dimension of which was to go hiking for ten day intervals in the sublime landscapes of the Pilbara and the Fitzgerald National Park, all the while reading, thinking, conversing philosophy as it resides in place. This was transformative. And yet.

And yet something still niggled. The closer I came to being connected, to my own thinking, to the culture of environmental protest I had long been part of, to the earth itself and my community of like-minded people who cared, the more I came to be disturbed, the farther the gulf yawned between a world that was at once so precious and sacred and a culture that was at once so aggressive and destructive. More troubling still was that no amount of theory, no amount of protest, no-*thing* seemed to bridge this gulf. Nothing made a difference.

This question that this thesis seeks to answer is, why? Why has a difference, which *makes a difference*, been lost to our system?¹ Why are we moving in only one direction – towards destruction and death – despite the many voices crying out against this?

It is a bleak reality to dwell on and explore. However it is necessary to dwell – as Gregory Bateson has us know - before anything else, before any action, we must seek understanding.² For to search primarily for solution is a symptom of the pathology of our culture and one that, while embedded in the dominant epistemology, perpetuates patterns of destruction. My hope then is to develop a deeper understanding of the conditions that have produced crisis. In this I do not pretend that my explorations of the questions I pose are in any way comprehensive and neither do I purport to cover in requisite depth or scope all that has been said surrounding this issue. On the one hand this is impossible as this ‘issue’ speaks to so many aspects of our being, to the cultural, ecological, social, psychological, geographical and historical contours of our world. On the other hand to attempt to traverse all that has been said would disrupt my intention. Rather, my approach is to look at the patterns and tendencies in culture, in theory and in thought itself. I am, as it were, looking from the corner of my eye to take in the warp and weave of the land rather than looking directly ahead at the view in front. In this kaleidoscopic approach I will inevitably overlook and leave out some important contributions to the landscape. I apologise for this at the forefront, and ask that the reader understand that this omission is in no way intentional but is inexorably linked to the nature of my analysis. I am also sure to gloss over certain distinctions when a more microscopic analysis could draw attention to much significant detail. However, again, to be immersed in this detail from the point at which I am standing is to lose sight of the land and it is the lay of the land that I wish to scrutinise.

It is important to highlight that this scrutiny begins with my own epistemological location, my own sense of knowing and my own space of unknowing. My knowing, perhaps my insight, is the sense of something, some time ago, having gone very wrong. This is what I understand to be the ontological error that lies at the heart of our culture that at the deep core of our culture is the premise – born from a horror of mortality –

¹ A difference which makes a difference, as the property of mental pattern and process is the insight of Gregory Bateson. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), 91-100.

² Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), 181.

that the earth is not our *rightful* home. The error is the deep-seated belief that to be human is to be separate from the other than human world. It is the belief that the earth's creatures, its changes, its rhythms and seasons, its vastness, dust and decay, are not in fact our own. The outcome of this thinking is of course that neither is the earth's beauty, wonder and knowing our own.

Tragically this idea is resilient, it has survived many millennia and taken on many instantiations. However, to call it a belief or an 'idea' is to somewhat misrepresent it. More correctly, I suggest it takes the shape of a cultural 'will' or 'desire.' As a feeling or sentiment it does not form part of the conscious cerebral realm, as ideas are mostly seen to do. Rather, this sentiment or will belongs to the non-conscious sphere, to the seat of anxiety from which it springs. This is important to note, for the non-conscious nature of this error implies that its address must also be at the non-conscious level, it must be sourced in ways of being and knowing that are outside the dictates and control of the conscious cultural mind. For some time, while theology was the conscious form through which this sentiment was expressed, address was available, through Nature, the ethical and the sacred. However the more dangerous form in which this sentiment is now embedded, the form of knowing itself as an objective system, means that these correctives have been both diminished and separated from the dominant form of knowing and being human.

As a part of this system and as part of this culture that has lost vast and multiple ways and forms of knowing – and being - in place, I also inhabit a space of unknowing. I do not know *what* I do not know, I can only garner *that* I do not know. Here, in this thesis, this unknowing traps me in the language at our disposal and traps me in the limitations that this language suggests, caught as it is – and you and I are – in the unknowing that characterises our system. This makes for tricky conceptual territory as I try to move across ridges with a compass in hand, moving incrementally forward and at the same time referring back. One can discard the compass but only when one 'knows' differently, perhaps at the end of the journey, perhaps not.

With this in mind, and with hope of crossing the ridges, I need to preface my use of two key terms; this is the nature and form of *subjectivity*, and the changing nature and form of the *ecological*, as used in this thesis. At the core of this thesis is the argument that the loss of subjectivity, as a form of knowing, is in late modernity deeply and systemically woven into ecological destruction. By subjectivity I do not mean a self, not in the conventional

understanding of the self as a discrete – and human – phenomena. This self is also in danger. But subjectivity is more precisely a property that inheres – or fails to inhere – in the world, one that emerges out of relationship with the other. The capacity for relationship, for intimacy and connection, is the space for subjectivity. Where this space is lost, so too is the capacity for being human, for being is only realised in the context of difference. Hence I suggest that the loss of subjectivity wired into ecological destruction, is the loss of *being human* wired into ecological destruction.

When I speak of ‘*ecological*’ destruction in this thesis I speak of the damage to places that are already divorced from relationship with the (western) human world. This presents a conceptual trap. For to articulate the error in our culture I need to scrutinise the place where we stand. Yet this place itself reflects and reinforces error, and reflects and reinforces unknowing. I attempt, therefore, while speaking of ecology, to unpack and map its genealogy. In so doing I attempt to historically situate the term ‘ecology’ as a marker of lost relationship. In this process I look briefly at embeddedness as a (non-western) cultural norm and the array of place descriptions, signifying a depth and detail of relationship, to which such embeddedness gives way. I then chart the evolution of ecology, from its earlier form in ‘oecology’ to its latter form in ‘environment.’ Key to my argument is the notion that the way we speak about place reflects a way of knowing place and a way of being in place. A failure to identify this rests in the failure to identify shifts in the epistemological baseline, to identify loss of knowing and loss of the capacity to know of this loss. This not-knowing, and the inability to name or express this not-knowing, continues to build further lack of awareness into the system. From this perspective, I argue that it is a mistake to name the current crisis as ecological or environmental, insofar as ecology references other-than-human systems, for while the effects of the crisis are obviously and tragically devastating to place and its creatures – the point of crisis is not ecological in nature. This crisis point is epistemological and it is heading in the direction of not recovery but death – it is a failure to know (otherwise) locked into the system itself, a failure to know of error, to know that we do not know, and in this failure, a loss of knowing of what it is to be human – thus a loss of the hope for correctives at the level of culture.

It must be stressed that this is a crisis locked into the patterns of knowing and being that define *western* culture. When speaking of human being, I do so to refer to the modes of being that characterise this culture. I do not intend to speak of all cultures and their

modes of being human, that unfortunately due to the pathology of our culture are also increasingly endangered, with many having become extinct over the preceding centuries. It is characteristic of our culture and its malformations that its spread and reach is wide. Thus while the particular forms of self-construction to which it gives rise rely on a level of material welfare particular to the consumer, the reach of its destruction is not localised to this space. To make possible the domination of the object this culture feeds on the diversity, integrity and beauty of the world. In this way we see the effects of climate change being global in scale, multi-national corporations reaching into the farthest flung, formerly pristine destinations to clear-fell, dragnet, mine, and detonate living landscapes for industrialised, mass-produced markets.

In the first three chapters of this thesis I trace the historical changes that lead from the loss of consciousness-in-place to the rise of knowledge-of-place. Here I focus on the loss of (alternative) knowing that accompanies ecological destruction and the exponential emergence and domination of a certain way of knowing and being in place. I argue that from the loss of relationship with place comes a loss of knowing of what it is to be human. Accompanying each loss, due to shifts in the baseline (of knowing and being), is the loss of *knowing of* loss. The continuation of such destruction and loss means an entrapment in the search for environmental ‘solutions’ and a systemic failure to know otherwise; this is the point of epistemological crisis.

In Chapter One, I chronicle and analyse the historical emergence of (environmental) protest and argue that, when the integrity of and relationship with place is taken into consideration, it is apparent that ecological consciousness and care is not increasing but diminishing over time. The failure to identify this reveals how far the baseline has shifted. I suggest that what is focused on in response to ecological (or social) destruction is the fact of destruction itself and how such destruction may be stymied by more knowledge – of a certain kind. In this, we fail to consider the loss of knowing, at the level of culture, that accompanies such destruction and that in turn further advances destruction. As a result we fail to consider the way loss of knowing breeds loss of knowing of loss, and where this cycle of loss may lead us.

In Chapter Two, I consider further the loss of ecological consciousness (at the level of culture) and the loss of ethical knowing (at the level of culture). Following Nash, I argue that the mything of nature as the wild perpetuates the story of culture and cannot therefore provide an alternative to the dominant way of knowing and being human. The

Romantics therefore, while attempting to stand alone on cultural shores, in their invocation of individual relationship with Wild nature, and as a precursor to the modern day environmental movement, function to reproduce the dominant culture. This is reinforced by the Romantics', and subsequent modern environmentalists', focus on the individual as the site of social and cultural change insofar as the very idea of the individual is one that emerges from the epistemological error defining our culture. Ecological consciousness (at the level of culture), I suggest, depends on intimate relationship with place (at the level of culture), and where this is diminished so too is the possibility for connection to and care for the other-than-human world. This is not to deny or diminish the discrete relationships that are available to any one person or community of people, rather it is to identify that such (irregular) difference is not a challenge or solution to the patterns of human being and knowing that dominate the modern world. However, we fail to identify this because from where we stand in late modernity our loss (like our error) is too far advanced, we fail to know what we do not know.

In Chapter Three, I compare the early American conservationists, and the movement they were part of, to the latter day environmental movement. Here I argue that contrary to popular lore, the conservationists were more ecologically conscious than subsequent environmentalists. This is because of the level of intimacy - the relationship the conservationists had with the land they were conserving. Following Richard W. Judd, I suggest that, insofar as this is the case, they fit more precisely in the naturalist tradition rather than that of the Romantics from whom the modern environmental movement takes its epistemological cue. The time of the conservationists was also, I suggest, a more promising time for change because epistemological error was less advanced than it is today, due in part to alternative knowing in the form of 'nature' and 'ethical knowing' still being to some extent culturally present. Ecological destruction and the reign of the individual were yet to reach pathological proportions.

However with the rise of modernity came the loss of alternative knowing, driven ever deeper by the incessant search to collect more and more knowledge of a certain type - objective, conscious 'evidence' ... of species destruction, of eco-system management, of wise resource use ... (non-consciously) produced as evidence to demonstrate our humanity. The environmental movement then began at a significant epistemological deficit and through no fault of its own is trapped in advanced epistemological error and

advanced epistemological loss. In the final section of this chapter I consider the school of thought called *deep ecology* and its attempts at cultural change. Deep ecology seeks to challenge the relationship the western self (or any self) has with the other-than-human world. It does so by suggesting the boundaries and extensions of this self can be variously re-mapped or dissolved to allow for a new consciousness of the world-as-self. I argue that, while deep ecology makes a viable and important attempt at cultural change it is ultimately not successful, for in its invocation of, and return to, the self as the site of change, it perpetuates the very notion of the separate self it seeks to challenge. It assumes that in a malformed and distorted world, the self while to some extent affected by this, is nonetheless *fundamentally* intact, and, in such, can renew relationship with a geographically and epistemologically remote, other-than-human world.

However, in arguing that place-based theory and action has yielded little change, I do not intend to underestimate the valuable associations between place and person that are made by writers such as Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas, Freya Mathews, Eric Katz and Glenn Albrecht, to name but a few of the key theorists. Yet I diverge from these thinkers in a key respect. While the inclination in this literature is to focus on particular relationships with place (certainly an important focus) or the effects of the loss of place on the human, my focus is on the feedback relationship. I am particularly concerned with how loss of place perpetuates loss of knowing, and how this in turn perpetuates further ecological destruction. In this I am interested in the way human-being is shaped and misshapen by the places in which we dwell and the way possibilities for self-hood are closed down where place as a permeable, living, space is closed down. My focus is significantly on our cultural pattern (of thinking, theorizing and being) as one that exerts synergistic impacts on place and self.

In Chapters Four and Five, I turn more precisely to culture itself, to analyse the loss of subjectivity that loss of relationship with place has produced. In Chapter Four I argue that the failure to identify the link between ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity, (due to the ontological error at the heart of our culture and the nature of the shifting epistemological baseline), has produced a situation whereby the late-modern self, in not 'knowing' of her existence, is sent on an endless search for 'proof.' We search for proof in the form the culture makes available, the form of the object. The outcome is the crafting of the self, the subject, into object – resulting in the erasure of subjectivity for the western self. Herein we are trapped in a self-reinforcing system with

no way of *knowing* otherwise, destroying in the process the integrity, stability and beauty of the other-than-human world, the possibility for deep and abiding relationship with this world, and in such, knowledge of what it is to be human.

In Chapter Five, I examine the pattern of thinking about the condition of the self in late-modernity, from the perspective of cultural theory. In this, what I wish to emphasise are the tendencies and patterns within cultural theory that marginalise and render insignificant the ecological and the material, when scrutinising the social and the self. Accordingly, while there are a vast number of theorists who have had, and continue to have, valuable insights surrounding the cultural changes that have ensued in the preceding centuries and in contemporary times, my focus is on three specific theorists as representative of those who consider place in the structure of the self and who diagnose and describe the *crisis of subjectivity* in late modernity. Yet, while the theorists I consider make important contributions to the analysis of the crisis-ridden self, they still reinforce the conditions of crisis by presenting this self as fundamentally *separate* - intact and open to change, irrespective of the state of the world within which she is placed. This self is, in a key sense, worldless.

Finally in Chapter Six I reflect on the perpetuation of error from a systems perspective employing the insights of two systems theorists, Gregory Bateson and Donella Meadows. In particular, I focus on the theory of Gregory Bateson, who draws attention to the mistaken understanding and description of mind in western culture, one where mind is seen to be a property of the individual skinbound self. Conversely he suggests that mind – and thus - knowing is a property of a system, composed of difference – a difference that makes a difference travelling in a circuit. This, as he sees it, is an ecological system, and its stability and health is determined by feedback processes, that in a stable system, are maintained by stocks, flows, in-built flexibility and diversity to avoid pathology and oscillations, which, if unchecked, can result in chaos and the death of the system. And this indeed, is the direction to which we are heading.

In light of such, this thesis is, above all, a plea to know otherwise, for slowly as our once-loved places are lost to the machines and the ways of knowing that they once harboured are destroyed, it seems to be apparent, after a time, that things could not be otherwise, surely?

But things, have, for the vast reach of time, been otherwise. I am reminded here of a complaint made to Gary Snyder, the eco-poet and activist, by a friend, who lamented that Snyder was always going against the 'flow', to which Snyder remarked that he was in fact going with the *real* 'flow' and that what his friend suggested was the flow was simply a two thousand year eddy.

I think perhaps this eddy has been around for some time longer, somewhere in the nether reaches of the western mind. Yet 'we', have been around for longer still, this we, is all of us, moonlight, tadpoles, dingoes, grass trees, orang-utans, blowfish. We have persisted and we have known otherwise. The earth will, one should think, in some form persist, but we will miss the orang-utan, the moonlight, the green bellied tree-frog, we will miss the place for human being in a more-than-human world.

Chapter One

The Changing Shape of Ecology

A working contradiction surrounding the ‘*environmental crisis*’¹ is the fundamental inability of environmental protest to stem or significantly alter the tide of ecological destruction despite the apparent ubiquity of such protest and the ubiquity of knowledge surrounding the crisis. Why, may we ask, is this so? Particularly, why is this so given what seems to be the rise in ecological consciousness, the surge of environmental literature and the proliferation of widespread information networks that detail and attempt to mitigate against environmental destruction? And further, what may this inability reveal about our cultural texts and our particular mode of being human? What may it say about our practise of constructing self and our practise of destroying place?

In this chapter I argue that this inefficacy persists because ecological consciousness has not risen but diminished over time. Key to my position, is the premise that what ecological consciousness requires is an intimate relationship with (and thus knowing of) place at the level of culture, not simply consciousness of a certain type of information surrounding environmental calamity. From the loss of ecological consciousness, and a loss of knowing of this loss, attempts to redress the crisis are inevitably distorted and limited. Such distortion and limitation can be easily seen in mainstream responses to the crisis, responses which perpetuate current modes of living and identify nature as a ‘resource’ to be preserved or consumed.² However, I propose that the responses of

¹ I use the term ‘environmental crisis’ to indicate its conventional application. However, my thesis argument, as outlined in the introduction, is that the fundamental nature of this crisis is not environmental but epistemological, and thus to call it environmental is to engage in false description. Subsequently, the expression I will use to refer to this time, is ‘the crisis’.

² For discussion of nature as a resource, see: Michael Barratt Brown, Tony Emerson and Colin Stoneman, eds., *Resources and the Environment: A Socialist Perspective* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman Books, 1976). Frederick Ferre and Peter Hartel, eds., *Ethics and Environmental Policy: Theory Meets Practice* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994). Garret Hardin, *Living within Limits:*

ecological protest and ecological science are also distorted insofar as they reproduce cultural assumptions and models of knowing, even while attempting to address ecological preservation and foster ecological knowledge. The outcome of such distortion is the failure to transform the patterns of human being and knowing that create the crisis.

Part of the distortion is an incapacity, at the level of culture, to apprehend what the limitations of the modern nature of protest are and how these are linked to our knowledge and understanding of ‘ecology.’ The problem here is one not of degree but of kind. My proposition is that the *type* of knowledge accrued in late modernity cannot instigate change in relationship to place (at the level of culture) for the kind of knowledge accumulated is that which assumes and perpetuates ethical and existential distance from place. Opposition to environmental destruction based on such information, inevitably reproduces this ethical and existential distance and ecological consciousness further diminishes. The perpetuation of this distance in our forms of knowing is also part of the reason as to why, despite large realms of the public ‘knowing’ about environmental destruction and the level of alarm this should raise, environmental *protest*, as a percentage of population, is not in fact very prevalent.

The failure to understand such limits in turn clouds our perception of the crisis and perpetuates mistaken assumptions surrounding both descriptions of, and solutions to, the crisis. By unpacking and critiquing the idea of ecology as a fitting description of and solution to the crisis, I aim to reveal the deeper nature of the crisis and show both why and how neither environmental knowledge nor environmental protest have managed to significantly ameliorate or stem ecological destruction.

Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). John Lemons, Laura Westra and Robert Goodland, eds., *Ecological Sustainability and Integrity: Concepts and Approaches* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998). Martin W. Lewis, *Green Delusions: An Environmentalist Critique of Radical Environmentalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

Part One – The Loss of Consciousness-in-Place

Ecology as a Site of Change

If ecological consciousness, as I propose, has over time not risen but fallen in proportion to the degradation of place this would suggest that the cultural pattern of knowing about and understanding place is not one that facilitates care and concern for place. I will argue that this is due to the fact that our current ways of being and ways of knowing fail to bear any inherent relationship to place; we exist, it would seem, in *extrados*. Where our ways of being and knowing are, or present as, (epistemologically) separate from place they do not offer an alternative to the ongoing destruction of place. Given that we name such destruction as ‘ecological’, what can an investigation into the changing meaning of ecology and the ‘ecological’ tell us about such capacity?

In the naming of ‘ecological’ crisis and in the proffering of ecological fixes we neglect to consider what is meant and understood by the idea of ‘ecology.’ It is important to remember that language and specifically names bear cultural resonance, they both tell, and, in the telling, reinforce a story of culture. Ecology as a name is no different and the story it tells, if we mine deep enough, is one of change. Ecology has multiple meanings, ones which have morphed over time. What we name today as ecology refers to a current practise and way of investigating and understanding nature, where this nature is separate from the observer and the investigative community at large. This is something very different to what would have been so perceived and understood two hundred, five hundred or a thousand years ago. By extending our historical imagination and looking back in time we see that our current understanding of ecology and earlier mappings of the ecological, bear little resemblance.

Ecology as Ontology to Ecology as Oeconomy

For a vast part of our human history, to be human, was, to be in place. To know therefore was to know of place, a knowledge that came from and fed back into being in place. As Nabhan relates, being-in-place was the fundamental experience of child development for millions of years.³ This meant children [and adults] were ecologically

³ Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 83.

literate about their home ground, knowing so well the “qualities of firewoods, the songs of birds, the identities of floral fragrances and mammalian musks,”⁴ and would express this kinship with the earth in songs and stories. The good and the right, what we today name as the ethical, emerged from these relations and the ways of knowing afforded by them. Shagbark Hickory and Vine Deloria both speak of the extent to which the natural world, was for the American Indians, a thoroughly moral world, within which one, as a participant, would find and understand the proper way to be human.⁵ Knowing as a property of relationship, included understanding of right and wrong relations. In this context, as Hughes observes:

...primal people’s treatment of the natural environment showed care and was guided by attitudes that might today be called religious, but from the standpoint of their own cultures were simply an integral part of the whole pattern of life.⁶

This pattern of person, place and creature as a co-evolving system formed the early sense of ecology. The form of knowing that emerged from such integration in reflecting this embeddedness meant that usually there was no singular term, such as ‘ecology’ or ‘environment’, used to express this connection. Indeed this would hardly have made sense for one was embedded not in place as a category, certainly not in the ‘environment’, but in particular places. Vine Deloria narrates the way in which the Plains Indians knowledge was circular, meaning there was:

...no ultimate terms or constituents of their universe, only sets of relationships that sought to describe phenomena. No concept could stand alone in the way that time, space and matter once stood as absolute entities in Western science.⁷

⁴ Nabhan and Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood*, 90. It is interesting to contrast this with the parallel forms of knowing today- where the fragrances best known are synthetic and mass produced and the songs most easily identified are those sung by pop-stars about human love and loss, nearly always bearing little to no relation with the other-than-human world. Nabhan reflects on this change as identified in a 1992 survey taken of 52 Indian children who are mostly living on the land, not in or near urban centres, yet 52 percent of whom still listed media as their primary teacher about the environment, while 71 percent claimed they learned more about the environment from school, than anywhere else and only 9 percent claimed they were taught about the environment through lived experience or at home.

⁵ Shagbark Hickory is the arborescent pseudonym of eco-philosopher Jim Cheney. Shagbark Hickory, “Environmental Etiquette/Environmental Practice: American Indian Challenges to Mainstream Environmental Ethics.” In *The Company of Others: Essays in Celebration of Paul Shepard*, edited by Max Oelschlaeger, 109-126 (Durango, CO: Kiuaki Press, 1995). Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner and Sam Scinta, eds., *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1999).

⁶ J. Donald Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World: Humankind’s Changing Role in the Community of Life* (London: Routledge, 2001), 21.

And we may add, neither could place have stood alone, in the way the environment now stands as a singular and defined object of scientific investigation. For this reason, belonging was expressed through a vast and detailed array of terms, of names and connections detailing a vast array of relationships. Echoing Deloria, Nabhan suggests that:

... oral traditions about plants, animals, treacherous waters and complex topography depend upon special vocabularies that enact particularities which may not be recognised in the lexicon of commonly spoken and widespread language.⁸

Expressing such particularity, the Plains Indians, had almost “limitless ways of describing snow, rain, wind or other natural phenomena,”⁹ reflecting the limitless potential for relationship with these phenomena. In such a setting ecology is not a science separate from geology, geography, biology, sociology and anthropology to name but a few investigations into knowing. Indeed the ‘biological knowledge’ of the Southwest Indians is embedded in stories, and these stories in turn are parts of innumerable other stories of which the Indian is an integral and inseparable part.¹⁰ Ecology in such a setting is a relationship that speaks to and of place. More often than not, in indigenous culture, place does the speaking first and the self, as Mathews observes, “and hence the subject, is always already an emanation of land, of country, of world.”¹¹ Ecology in this sense was the nature of being human as much as it was human being in nature.

Obviously the transition from ecology as a mode of *being* to ecology as a mode of *observation* was a slow one that proceeded over millennia. In this procession ecological consciousness, I suggest, steadily declined as human embeddedness in place characteristic of hunter-gatherer populations shifted, giving way to a new distancing from place. This, while arguably abrupt at first,¹² continued in incremental measures through antiquity and

⁷ Deloria, Foehner and Scinta, eds., *Spirit and Reason*, 48.

⁸ Nabhan and Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood*, 74.

⁹ Deloria, Foehner and Scinta, eds., *Spirit and Reason*, 48.

¹⁰ Leslie Silko, cited in Nabhan and Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood*, 84.

¹¹ Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Toward a Recovery of Culture* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 103.

¹² Many theorists cite the Agricultural Revolution as the point of change. Yet they do so by emphasising the material changes this revolution brought about – changes in modes of food production, sedentary lifestyle, and forms of labour. Peter Bellwood, *First Farmers: The Origins of Agricultural Societies* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2005), Mark Nathan Cohen, *The Food*

medieval times, accelerating exponentially with the onset of modernity. Increasing detachment, Hughes suggests, was a result of an increase in ‘man’s’ (sic) abilities and a concomitant decrease in sensitivity to place: “finally a break with earlier thinking and doing occurred, which depended on environmental consciousness. It seems that at some time or other an ‘ecological sin-fall’ occurred.”¹³ While I disagree with Hughes’ speculation surrounding the cause of such detachment being a material one, it is clear that a defining moment was reached past which hunter and gatherer existence was no longer the primary mode of being in the world. After this, agrarian ways of life came to dominate. Nonetheless, for much of early antiquity and the medieval period, a relative proximity with nature persisted. This meant, that somewhat by default, ecological thinking continued as a form of being-in-world. Hughes writes that perception of the oneness of nature was apparent in early Greek society, even though, unsurprisingly, the term ‘ecology’ was not used to express this.¹⁴ Democritus, for example, wrote that “people learned to weave from spiders, to sing from songbirds, swans and nightingales,” for this reason he claimed that, “in the most important concerns we are the pupils of animals.”¹⁵ According to Hughes, belief in such connectivity was also expressed in Plato’s and the Pythagorean’s idea that the whole cosmos was alive, including all of its constituent parts, so one should not therefore hurt or disrespect any part, for to do so is to damage the whole.¹⁶ While nature continued to be a significant presence in everyday life this model of thinking and being in world largely continued, and according to Lewis, was the expected consequence of a life where, up to the end of the medieval period:

...the percentage of the population who knew a great deal about certain animals must have been far larger ... than in modern England. It could not have been otherwise in a society where everyone who could be was a horseman, hunter and

Crisis in Prehistory: Overpopulation and the Origins of Agriculture (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), Jack R. Harlan, *Crops and Man: Views on Agricultural Origins* (Madison, WI: American Society of Agronomy, 1992). While the Agricultural Revolution is an important transition point, its significance in terms of my argument is the changes in modes of relating to place, and thus changes in human being and knowing, that its evolution signified.

¹³ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 71. Hughes continues with the claim that the severity of current ecological conditions requires a return of environmental consciousness. He however suggests that this can be achieved through ‘intellectual reflection’ and ‘understanding the necessities.’ This is a position that is in stark opposition to my argument, to the extent that the kind of intellectual reflection available to the culture at large is one that reinforces the problem and the loss of ecological consciousness.

¹⁴ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 54.

¹⁵ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 16.

¹⁶ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 55.

hawker, and everyone else a trapper, fisher, cowman, shepherd, swineherd, goosegirl, henwife, or beekeeper.¹⁷

The ‘knowing’ of which Lewis speaks did not emerge from statistics or theory, but from experience of place, a place which was drenched in meaning, where “every word, action and thought had some impact on the world and in which every falling leaf or calling bird was a message to man.”¹⁸ At the same time, however, this period was also one that continued to produce a theologically sanctioned human separation from world and an incrementally increasing capacity to build that separation into the world.¹⁹ Over time people started to live more and more in urban centres and in such settings, as Hughes suggests, seemed to lose the ecological sense of the oneness of life, instead harbouring the belief that they could “change Earth for the better.”²⁰ What such separation desensitized people to was the fate of other-than-human lives. Amidst a multitude of losses, this resulted in, hunters killing “the United Kingdom’s last native brown bear in the tenth century ... [and] the last British beaver perish[ing],”²¹ by 1526. As such capacity for destruction advanced so did ecological consciousness steadily wane.²²

It was during the eighteenth century, as destruction of, and separation from, the other-than-human world escalated alongside the dissolution of embeddedness as a cultural norm, that ecology emerged as a *term* to express the way in which things hang together. As Worster and Hughes suggest the term first came into popular vocabulary via the earlier expression, ‘oeconomy’, more specifically the ‘oeconomy of nature.’ In its earliest

¹⁷ Lewis, cited in Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 81.

¹⁸ Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 81-82.

¹⁹ Shepard likewise argues that from the perspective of the Christian puritans from the sixteenth century on, the city had become an “arid pavement in which space was defined by human logic derived from celestial observation, a cultural nowhere that allowed the etherealised believers to disengage from paths across the earth and cults of the soil.” Shepard, *Nature and Madness*, 84.

²⁰ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 84.

²¹ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 86.

²² As Hughes writes of this time: “gazing down over the world from above in the Middle Ages, in AD 1300 perhaps, one ... might have discerned changes since ancient times: swathes of forest removed; new machines being used, ploughing taking place faster over longer stretches of field ... Built up areas were spreading, and with them, clearance, erosion and advancing desert. The Earth as a whole was, however, full of life in many thriving ecosystems. Parts of the continent were still covered with forests. Those places might have looked wild, but peoples had lived there for centuries or millennia and had learned to subsist within their local ecosystems. Elsewhere the rate at which humans were altering the face of the Earth was slow but accelerating...preparations for rapid modern changes were made in the Middle Ages.” Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 83.

incantation oecology denoted one's home, habitat, literally ones *oikos*, one's house.²³ It was used to account for the way in which all things hold together in the natural world to form a cohesive, dynamic whole. Worster writes that ecology:

... emerged as a more comprehensive way of looking at the earth's fabric of life; a point of view that sought to describe all of the living organisms of the earth as an interacting whole, often referred to as the 'oecology of nature'.²⁴

Such oecology was at this point not a product of sheer chance, nor an outcome of natural evolution, rather it was granted in purposeful design by the benevolent creator whose omniscience afforded to life on earth a wondrous symphony. Thomas stresses this point of origin, writing that:

The modern idea of the balance of nature ... had a theological basis before it gained a scientific one. It was belief in the perfection of God's design which preceded and underpinned the concept of the ecological chain, any link of which it would be dangerous to remove. In the eighteenth century most scientists and theologians accordingly maintained that all created species had a necessary part to play in the oecology of nature.²⁵

The oecology of nature thus reflects a way of thinking about human-nature relations and inter-human relations that is informed by a sense of collective purpose and a (theological) sense of the good. In this way it could present as a model for human life and society. Accordingly, a good and balanced society would present as one in which the needs of all were met and no one population significantly diminished or eradicated the other. Such a homeful and peaceful union of person, place and religious order was perhaps best historically represented and symbolised by the figure of Gilbert White in his native Selborne.

At the Threshold of Change

Gilbert White (1720-1793) was the pastor of Selborne, a rural village in southeast England, and was, according to Worster, one of England's original naturalists. His musings were written in letter form and later transcribed into a book *The Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. The book, Worster observes, was instrumental in laying "the

²³ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 37.

²⁴ Worster, *Nature's Economy*, viii.

²⁵ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (London: Allen Lane, 1983), 278.

foundations for the natural history essay in England and America. It was also one point of origin ... for the modern study of ecology.”²⁶ White not only discussed the habits and patterns of the creatures and critters within his local habitat, preferring to identify these by living observations and interactions as distinct from the otherwise popular creation and dissection of cadavers, but was also an active conservationist observing the laws relating to the burning of forests and making note of when these were contravened. He was one of the first naturalists to trace in personal and public terms the intersection of the community of ‘nature’ with that of the community of ‘humans.’

White’s mode of world observation and placement, fashioned before oecology became ecology, was that of the citizen scientist, – a person of the village, the parish, and the land who brought daily observations to public light and testimony in tracing the movements of his community where that community was distinctively more-than-human. In his daily meanderings and recollections, White always seemed to hold the consciousness that rather than standing outside of the living synthesis, he is indeed part of it. In this respect he encapsulated what Worster describes as an Arcadian sensibility.²⁷ By this, Worster alludes to the ideal of oneness, contentment and peace with the natural world that characterised early pastoral life and pagan culture. For the pastoral goal, as Meeker too suggests, has “always been to find in *rural* nature an alternative to the ills of civilization”²⁸ (italics added). Virgil’s writings in particular, he suggests, articulate the oppression of city life and the contrasting comforts of [rural] nature. This Arcadian temperament was revealed both by White’s parish habits and practises and by his marked disinterest in life and events outside the perimeters of his precinct, even those as consequential as the political unrest which would give way to the French Revolution. That White remained relatively oblivious to the social and political turmoil unravelling in France towards the end of his life,²⁹ was undisturbed by the upheavals in his own country in response both to the American cry for independence and the technological age which was swiftly and irrevocably dawning in England, and that he rather remained absorbed and preoccupied by the activities and changes taking place in his parish

²⁶ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 5.

²⁷ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 3-26.

²⁸ Joseph W. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 52.

²⁹ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 11-12. Worster here charts the disinterest White has in these events, but cites it as something of a limitation on White’s part. To the contrary however I interpret this omission as evidence of the extent of White’s embeddedness in and commitment to his own particular place.

indicates that epistemology, ontology and ecology remained to a significant extent integrated in his person. Or put more simply, here was a person still resolutely in place.

As such, it would have made little sense to White to react to, be informed by, take a stance on, or have feelings and concerns regarding that which was outside of his place and thus fundamentally *unknown* to him in his integrated, 'oeconomical', sense of what it is to know. The permutations of drama and disaster some thousand miles away had little impact on the swifts, woodpigeons, meadow flies and clover which framed his life. It had no relevance to White's role as pastor, as naturalist, as a community member of Selborne. It did not bear any relation to his conversation of the good – or thus the bad. This was not provincialism but membership. That in later times yearning for this kind of belonging is considered, naive, idealistic or delusional by the rationalists and those who advocate for the idea of 'progress', and as Worster writes, that it is only, "in a more modern consciousness [that such reconciliations could] seem superficial, false or impossible,"³⁰ indicates the degree to which we have clearly and deeply forgotten that to be human, is to be a person in place.

The cultural significance of White lies in the point he inhabits on the eve of a critical cultural shift and thus the light, his way of life shed, on the cultural transformation that took place thereafter. The dissolution of White's way of life, as a cultural practise, symbolized not only the ending of a sympathetic unity of person, purpose and place but also that historical juncture where there was a significant shift in ecological consciousness and the accompanying sense of what it is to be human. In his person, his parish and his practice, White reflected a living symbiosis of ecology, ontology and epistemology. He became a symbol of a time, a place and a union that would, through the ongoing culmination and consolidation of cultural patterns, henceforth be splintered. More significantly still, with the consequence of such splintering would come the demise of symbiosis as an *ideological* possibility, at the level of culture. What I mean by this is that while such a view could, in the future, be 'chosen' by the individual it would cease to be available as a way of being and knowing at the broad and inclusive level of culture. As a consequence, the individuals attempting to live in this way would be separated from the mainstream, and in such separation would be rendered largely ineffectual as a socio-cultural alternative or model for change.

³⁰ Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 11.

As oeconomy as a mode of both knowing of, and being in, place became ecology as a form of knowing-of-place, and as intimately known places morphed into the environment, villages like Selborne became in the cultural imagination, a ready antidote to the new 'habitus' being created by Enlightenment fervour and industrial zeal. The attraction of White's writings and of Selborne for many of his contemporaries and the succeeding generation(s) was the idyllic contrast it offered to a rapidly industrialising England with all the social, aesthetic and environmental ills that such industrialisation presented. Crowded, dirty, noisy, septic and harrowing urban spaces soon obliterated the horizons of eighteenth century pastoral life. The values afforded by the Arcadian model, those of habitation, symbiosis and intimacy, provided a moral and spiritual refuge from the competitive, isolating and alienating space of a new world order. This was a time when longing for ideals of rural peace and harmony ran high. As Thomas observes, where:

...factories multiplied, the nostalgia of the town dweller was reflected in his little bit of garden, his pets ... his taste for wildflowers and bird watching and his dream of a weekend cottage in the country.³¹

In this respect, Selborne became a point of yearning and imagination, a (still) "living memory of a world that had been lost."³² So for up to fifty years after his death, White and his Selborne remained in the cultural baseline of what it was to be human and what it was to be in place. Yet, in the ensuing century, Selborne ceased to be this alternative and ceased to be a place either 'protected' or 'yearned' for. People did not rally or petition for the likes of Selborne, it was neither an ecological priority nor an ecological issue. It was home still, to a community of creatures, but for itself it was redundant. For the sense of what it was to be human had shifted and it was now culturally demonstrated and subliminally understood that such places were not home. Indeed, in the wake of industrial and technological revolution the sense of the natural world as home began to exponentially dissolve. At this time, the natural world was not only increasingly 'unknown' at the level of culture it was also increasingly contaminated.

³¹ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 14. Likewise, Meeker observes the way in which the "pastoral flourishes in times of urban crisis ... [where] agriculture becomes symbolic of both structural integrity and moral innocence." Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival*, 54-55. However Meeker also identifies the paradox that inheres in the idea of escaping culture through the retreat to rural nature – for this very nature is itself a product of the machine culture and as he observes it is this culture that will inevitably destroy the nature to which one is fleeing. Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival*, 57.

³² Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 14.

Outdoor air pollution, a direct consequence of city life,³³ increased smog and smoke to such an extent that the outside was not habitus, it was the inside of buildings that became the refuge against a toxic environment. This toxicity also included water pollution that likewise resulted from industrialisation and urbanisation.³⁴

During these times, even those who continued to work the land were not immune from the drivers of industry and the way in which such forces intensified separation from place. As McGrayne illustrates, in charting the rise and use of chemical compounds in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century Europe, the search for cheap and prodigious amounts of alkali to use for washing sodas and soap meant that “more and more trees and plants were burned in Western Europe and North America,”³⁵ whilst peasants in England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, the Orkney Isles and Hebrides, abandoned their farms and herds for months at a time to collect and dry seaweed that instead of using to manure their land they would sell to chemists and industrialists for soap making purposes.³⁶ One such was the late eighteenth century French chemist, Nicholas Leblanc, who found a chemical alternative to the diminishing sources of naturally occurring alkali. Yet as McGrayne makes clear, this posed yet another threat to the outdoors as a habitable and homeful terrain:

For each ton of washing soda made, three quarters of a ton of intensely acidic hydrogen chloride gas spewed into the air. Raining down as hydrochloric acid, it turned trees and hedges into gaunt skeletons and poisoned farmland... As hydrochloric acid poured into waterways, it combined with sulphur to make hydrogen sulfide gas, spreading a rotten egg smell for miles round.³⁷

³³ John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 55.

³⁴ Sharon Bertsch McGrayne, *Prometheans in the Lab: Chemistry and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001), 43-57.

³⁵ McGrayne, *Prometheans in the Lab*, 5.

³⁶ McGrayne, *Prometheans in the Lab*, 6.

³⁷ McGrayne, *Prometheans in the Lab*, 11. McGrayne comments that such pollution, emerging at the start of the French Revolution, remained uncontrolled for decades. So much so that a visitor, coming to Liverpool in 1846— a major Leblanc factory town – commented that it was a “sordid, ugly town. The sky is a low-hanging roof of smeary smoke. The atmosphere is a blend of railway tunnel, hospital ward, gas works and open sewer. The features of the place are chimneys, furnaces, steam jets, smoke clouds and coalmines.” McGrayne, *Prometheans in the Lab*, 12. This is not because Liverpool was the exception but rather it represented the character of life in early industrial Europe, where as McGrayne describes it was most difficult to sue the perpetrators of pollution for the contamination from one company could not be separately identified from that of other companies.

It is, I suggest, not an accident that this increased capacity for, and practise of, cleaning the home and self, intersected with an increased capacity for, and practise of, contaminating and destroying place. For, in this setting, home and self increasingly came to be understood as an internal space of contrivance, ingenuity and detail, a barricade and brace against the anonymity and competitive pulse of the industrial world.³⁸ Rather than belonging to the natural world, home and self, stood against its ‘threatening’ influence and its confronting mortal dimensions. In this context Selborne, as a home and place-based ideal, effectively disappeared from the ecological conversation and the ecological imagination. Emerging in this period was a new understanding and definition of the ecological and Selborne in being neither the wild, nor a novel epistemological object, did not fit this definition. Importantly ‘Nature’ in Selborne was not ‘other.’

The Rise of Ecology as Science

As Selborne disappeared as a point of remembrance, so did the oeconomy of nature, as the study of home, fall from the public vernacular, with the science of ecology – the study of creatures and places that were removed from home - taking its place. As a product and purveyor of the new science, ecology reflects the rise of science in the definition and determination of place.

Ecology, as a term, was coined by the German Darwinian, Ernest Haeckel, in 1866. By this time, the preservation of place was not on the increase, to the contrary, the destruction of place and creatures was escalating. As Hughes observes; “human exploitation of the natural world increased on an unprecedented scale in the period between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the 1960s.”³⁹ What we then see in the emergence of ecology as a new way of thinking about and relating to place is a new distance from place. This distance was in part geophysical as the domination of city life meant the intensifying utilisation and destruction of the countryside to serve the drivers of ‘progress’ and an increasing remoteness from and consequent disregard for the living other-than-human world:

³⁸ Commenting on the conflation of ideas and modes of being, Weston observes that, “Individualism and its associated idea of privacy ... developed alongside a revolution in home and furniture design,” Anthony Weston, “Before Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Ethics*, 14 (1992): 327.

³⁹ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 141.

The city (London) and its inhabitants, particularly the poorest ones, were increasingly cut off from the countryside by the phenomenal spread of suburbs ... in 1500 three quarters of the population lived in the countryside; by 1900 a similar proportion lived in towns and cities.⁴⁰

The distance also became, at the level of population, an epistemological one. For the more the person-place symbiosis is severed the more place ceases to be a point of subjectival relation and increasingly becomes a point of disinterest, or, one of objective analysis. The latter stance was that claimed by the modern scientist – ecologists and environmentalists amidst others – in the form of the expert ‘observer.’ Matthews illuminates this transition, observing that:

...at the moment we ceased to be immersed in the subjectival field of the world, we began to ask ourselves what this world was. Indeed our capacity to ask this question, to seek to ‘know the world’ was henceforth regarded as the distinctive vocation of humanity ... the presupposition of such knowing – the conversion of world into object, the confiscation of its subjectivity – was forgotten, relegated to unsayability.⁴¹

So while ecology as an emerging discipline of the mid to late nineteenth century advanced systemic thinking, it was not the case that the person was seen as an authentic part of this system, rather the role of the human in this setting was to analyse and investigate this system. To admit oneself to the system would mean that the objective scientist, as defined by enlightenment methodology, would no longer be a workable proposition. This was accompanied, as Walter writes, by:

...the secularization of ideas, the emancipation of science from moral values and the fashion of individualism [all of which] opened the door to a new conception of nature accentuating even more confidence in the unlimited potential of knowledge oriented towards the mastery of one’s environment.⁴²

The cultural assumption however, that ecology references and speaks to an idea of the whole, where that whole includes human being, evidences the inability, at the level of culture, to identify epistemological change and distortion, including the loss of ecological consciousness. For what we are actually referring to when speaking of ecology is a discourse that has emerged from and continues to reproduce, both in its

⁴⁰ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 122-123.

⁴¹ Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality*, 107.

⁴² Francois Walter, “The Evolution of Environmental Sensitivity 1750-1950.” In *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by Peter Brimblecombe and Christian Pfister, 231-247 (New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 1990), 239.

methodology (of the expert observer) and in its ideology (stemming from enlightenment science and fundamental cultural premises), the idea of the separation of the human from the other-than-human world.⁴³ In such severance, and despite accruing ‘knowledge’, ecological consciousness is not heightened but diminished. However, to assume that ecological thinking produced a new distance from the other-than-human world would be to shoot the messenger, it is rather that, the perpetuation of such distance produced – amidst other phenomena – ecological thinking. Here was the emergence therefore of a new epistemological space, a new ecological space, a new ethical space and a new carving of the self.

Dis-integration of the Ethical

While separation from place advanced with the rise of ecology as a science, it would be misrepresenting the systemic nature of these changes to imply that separation from place, at the level of culture, is the singular explanation for accelerated ecological destruction and diminished ecological consciousness. Accompanying and reproducing this separation was the rise of the epistemologically disenfranchised individual, and the concomitant dis-integration of the ethical. When ethical knowing was no longer integrated with or part of a wider knowing – whether this is early ecological knowing or later theological knowing – it soon became ‘object’, reified in rights discourse or reduced to a point of individual choice and preference.

When, in the mid nineteenth century, the concept of ecology was first entering the public vernacular, Christianity was still the dominant metaphysical framework. While ecology brought with it the notion of an implicit order, this was not a direct affront to the notion of the explicit designer central to theological belief, rather the two managed to coalesce in an explanation that accounted for ‘natural’ design and an interventionist first and final act. This somewhat clumsy synthesis reveals the contradiction that sits at the heart of the splintering of ecology as a science or body of knowledge from ecology as a way of thinking and being. For theology, as a meaning making framework, could only incorporate ecology as a ‘theory’, insofar as it could be integrated within the sense of what it is to be a Christian and to know God. Yet the framework of Christian

⁴³ See Mary Midgley, *Science and Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992).

knowing, ultimately rests on the anti-ecological belief that the human is not part of, but superior to, and separate from, the other-than-human world.⁴⁴ This ontological framework that told of the ultimate ‘truth’ of separation, underwrote therefore the pursuit of knowledge and the forms this knowing could take. Ecology as a science (not a way of being-in-world) would then reflect and reinforce not connection with, but separation from, the other-than-human world. It is no surprise then that, consistent with the premise of separation, ecology as a science does not absorb and integrate in an ecological whole the other sciences. Rather, each is separate from the next, fracturing into hydrology, biology, entomology, geology, ornithology, zoology and palaeontology to name but a few, alongside the ‘human’ sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, which are not integrated into the science of ecology. Likewise place is no longer known by multiple names signifying many relationships but is classified by one name signifying a point of separation – the space of the environment. In this context more ecological knowledge could not and has not changed human relations with the other-than-human world but rather functions to perpetuate the model of existing relations.

However, while ecology emerged when Christianity persisted as the dominant epistemological model, over time this model was replaced. This was by the monoliths of Cartesian science, Lockean sociology and Newtonian physics, which were cloaking the world in a seamless rationality, endeavouring to rid it of all spirituality, mysticism and superstition.⁴⁵ The cumulative and continuing effect of these intellectual forces was the perception, and construction, of an increasingly logical, mechanical, rational and disenchanted world, which as the laws of physics alone would suggest, pitted “atom against atom and individual against individual.”⁴⁶ Indeed such laws, alongside the ideological shift brought forth by the French, and the earlier American, revolution, made available the crafting of the individual. From the collapse of the *ancien regime* and associated structures, the individual emerged as the subject of political discourse, chief amidst which was the revolutionary rights discourse. Crafted into a uniform entity

⁴⁴ Bear in mind that the Gilbert White mode of knowing, was a fusion of ecology as a form of being in world with Christianity as a form of knowing the world and the self. It is the consequent splintering of this fusion that set the epistemological tone for ecology as a science and the separation of knowing from values.

⁴⁵ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 252.

⁴⁶ Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 41.

(although less uniform than today's single purpose 'consumer') the modern citizen came to assume certain inalienable rights. Hence, by virtue of becoming part of an abstract whole, the individual was removed from a specific centre – a specific community of belonging. What this late nineteenth century period of the West thus witnessed, was the recession of place, in both its geo-physical and community forms, as a site of epistemological and ethical navigation, alongside the emergence of the abstract individual as the site of social and political contestation. The rights-bearing individual emerged as the prize of modern life and the road by which all subsequent battles would be fought. This would have far-reaching implications not only for the environmental movement as an attempt at cultural transformation but also for the very shaping of that world by a new idea of the self. It was within this world that the 'Creator', as an explanatory force and presence, was becoming slowly redundant. At these historical crossroads, science, including ecological science, would come to not support but supplant an increasingly contested theism.⁴⁷

As Christian knowing was waning as a cultural form and being replaced by the search for 'objective' truth and understanding, as defined by enlightenment science, ethical knowing, at the level of culture was slowly being lost. The ostensibly value-free nature of knowing as pursued by enlightenment science meant that values and ethics no longer fitted the cultural definition of what it is to know (and what it is, thus, to be human). They became in short a source of cultural un-knowing. Values could still be discussed by the individual, but only as a matter of 'opinion' or 'choice', whose validity was only relative to the holder of that opinion or choice; they could not, either as individual opinions and choices nor as collections of these, be included as cultural knowledge. At the same time 'rights' came to take centre stage, not as a point of discussion and contestation, but as an object, a possession of the individual, individual acts and designated groups. While the number and membership of these groups expanded over

⁴⁷ Indeed mirroring the domination of the modern 'objective', evidence based form of knowing, (where such evidence needs to be both material and materially, 'objectively', testable) the 'test and consequent cultural validity' of theism would soon depend, not on faith, but on material 'proof'. Consequently in the seventeenth and eighteenth century we see an increasing number of texts arguing for (or against) God's existence based on miracles, apparitions, other associated theistic phenomena and rational argument itself. See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom on Man and the Origin of Evil* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), Pascal's wager, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Intuitive revelations of 'feeling' the divine or just 'knowing' would count for little in terms of evidence, since this kind of knowing was merely 'subjective'.

time so that by the twentieth century they included women, homosexual communities, African-Americans, 'life', asylum, certain animals, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, in the opposite direction to the 'free' exchange of opinion, the absolute certainty and object-ive status that accompanied rights dispensation meant that discussion and debate surrounding relationship, to people and to place, was increasingly not had.

This is not to devalue the many significant and important changes that transpired through the invocation of rights discourse, particularly for minority groups, but to draw attention to my claim that rights do not provide a source of ethical knowing at the level of culture – and therefore cannot be a source for cultural transformation. For like the dominant (objective) knowing, rights exist not as a value, subjectively informed – by relationship, connection, detail – but as an object,⁴⁸ whose proof and validity is pre-determined in the materiality of life itself. If I am alive, and am so, for instance, as a woman, as a child or an elder, I have certain rights. As an object of knowledge, they are not to be overturned, contested, held up to community scrutiny, challenged by other modes of (relational) knowing.⁴⁹ They are subject to violation but not eradication.

This has created the situation that Weston describes where:

...we are too used to that easy division of labor that leaves ethics only the systematic tasks of 'expressing' a set of values that is already established, and abandons the originary questions to the social sciences. As a result ethics is incapacitated when it comes to dealing with values that are now entering the originary stage.⁵⁰

In this setting 'the good', like place, comes to bear only an incidental relationship to the nature of human *being*. Where, to be human, is to know of one's separation from the other-than-human world, and where, such knowledge is unhinged from relationship to community and place, an ethics based on rights, in also existing independently from relationship, is not connected to any sense of the good. Knowing becomes its own end, a cultural pursuit that ultimately turns the world, (and as we will see in Chapter Four,

⁴⁸ A similar point is made by Val Plumwood in her critique of rationality. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993). I pick up on her work in Chapter Three's discussion on Deep Ecology.

⁴⁹ I am not here suggesting that discussion surrounding rights per-se is not had. Clearly this is the case but it is nearly always only the case when an argument for a new right bearing entity is being had. Once the rights have been established it is not culturally plausible to then contest this status or to suggest that other kinds of relationship could trump or be more important than the given rights.

⁵⁰ Weston, "Before Environmental Ethics," 331.

ultimately the self) into object. The search for the good then is inner-directed and individually oriented while protection of and care of place as an expression of this, if it exists at all, does so only as an individual concern.

If Clive Hamilton and Charles Taylor are right in their claims that to be a human self is to be a moral self, and that “to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space,”⁵¹ then the cultural exploration of our humanity in the search for objective, value-free knowledge is a search that destroys our experiential, moral capacity to be, and to know what it is to be, human. Lost then, with the loss of the theological (and early ecological) framework, is the ethical as a source of knowing available to culture. This is not to suggest that the theological framework somehow guaranteed ‘good’ action, indeed history suggests otherwise. Whilst Hughes proposes that Christianity (like other religious faiths) acted as something of a safeguard against the unbridled destruction of nature, this arguably, is not so much because Christianity advanced protection of nature, indeed the contrary was often the case, but because the Christian framework meant that ethical reflection was a property of the whole. The wrong and the right, good and evil, in this setting were not purely subjective interpretations of any given event or action but were determined by the level of allegiance to or contravention from culturally agreed upon norms. As Hughes observes, when Cleomenes set fire to a sacred grove in Sparta and burned 5000 Argive soldiers to death, some people thought he was driven mad by the thought of divine punishment, because destroying a god’s forest was as much of a sin as killing men in refuge.⁵² In this setting, it was as equally *wrong* to wantonly destroy as it was punishable. Conversely, where the intrinsic and implicit relationship to the good

⁵¹ Clive Hamilton, *Clive Hamilton; “Reclaiming Morality from Conservative Dogma and Post-Modern Indifference,”* <http://clivehamilton.com/reclaiming-morality-from-conservative-dogma-and-post-modern-indifference/> (last modified August 12, 2008). Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 28. It must be noted here however, that distinct from my position, Hamilton and Taylor consider the possibility to be human and moral as a possibility that is latent within every human self. To cut through cultural distortion and access this essence is the task of any one person. To the contrary I suggest that the potential to be human and moral exists to the extent that we persist in relationship with the other-than-human world. Where this relationship is lost at the level of culture, so too is the possibility for the realisation of human being lost, to most of the selves that in-form this culture.

⁵² J. Donald Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 5. Compare this with Thomas’s account of scientists reared in the Enlightenment tradition who he suggests studied the natural world in order that it could better serve human life. He reports William Forsyth remarking in 1802, as part of a plea to observe caterpillars that “it would be of great service to get acquainted as much as possible with the economy and natural history of all these insects, as we might thereby be enabled to find out the most certain method of destroying them.” Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, 16.

(and the bad) that theology (or the early sense of ecology) provided is lost, the search for truth, for knowledge, is set free from ethical restraint, and indeed this very search becomes the driving force of human being – the ultimate non-contestable good.⁵³

Key to this transition, and the domination of the epistemological framework of enlightenment science, was the removal of the epistemological focus and power from the citizen to the expert. In the search for objectivity, the Gilbert White like navigation and epistemological authority of being-in-place was incrementally removed not only by the very destruction of place but by the destruction of the authority with which the citizen scientist and eventually the citizen per-se could speak of place and of experience. This, as Pepper writes, is a key message of Newtonian science: it tells us that “we are wrong and that what we think we see is unreal.”⁵⁴ This departure of the citizen scientist as participant of the living system, in giving way to the expert scientist as observer and manager of the living system, heralded both the need for, and defined the limits of, environmental protest. Yet, as we will see, the emergence of the *culture* of protest in response to knowledge of wide-scale destruction, illuminates not the rise, but the loss, of ecological consciousness.

Part Two – The Rise of Knowledge-of-Place

Stirrings of Dissent

If, as I am suggesting, ecological consciousness emerges from close intimacy with, and embeddedness in, place at the level of community/culture, then a decline in relationship with place will mean a decline in ecological consciousness. Such decline will, one can expect, result in a relative lack of connection to and care for the wellbeing of local places and creatures. If we look back in time, with a lens that encompasses place, person

⁵³ Skolimowski sees the separation of knowledge from values as a product of the scientific and industrial revolution, as compared to medieval times where knowledge and values were intimately linked (if anything scientific knowledge had to be subordinated to religious values). Henryk Skolimowski, *Eco-philosophy* (London: Marion Boyars, 1981). It is also for this reason, I suggest, that today ‘research’ is pursued at all costs without an ethical check to this pursuit. Even when ethics approvals are sought these approvals regard the individual subjects of the research, not the value, or questions surrounding the value, of the research itself.

⁵⁴ David Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 47.

and relationship to place, we can see that as destruction of place has risen so the level of concern for place has consistently diminished.

While it is often assumed that environmental protest is a phenomena that began in the middle of the twentieth century, a closer examination suggests that a smouldering environmental protest extends back to Ancient Greece with the early observation of and laments over human-induced ecological change, and a checking, even if moderate, of the ravaging impulses of human communities. As far back as 600 bce, Solon the lawgiver, proposed to ban the cultivation of steep slopes to prevent soil erosion. Peisistratus, in approximately 546 bce, also introduced a bounty for farmers who planted olive trees to offset deforestation and over grazing.⁵⁵ In 431 bce, Herodotus, who according to Hughes was the first Greek historian whose work still survives, mapped the changing patterns of the Nile. His writings also narrate the fact that he was displeased by the number of changes in the natural environment, believing that, amidst other things, “massive works like bridges and canals demonstrated an over-reaching human pride.”⁵⁶ Two centuries later, Plato lamented the ecological damage wrought on Attica:

What now remains compared with what then existed is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth having wasted away ... There are some mountains which now have nothing but food for bees, but they had trees not long ago ... and boundless pasturage. Moreover, it was enriched by the yearly rains from Zeus, which were not lost to it, as now.⁵⁷

Conservation, according to Hughes, was also key to Aristotle’s idea of the ‘good city’. For this reason, Aristotle advocated that each city should instil ‘wardens of the country.’⁵⁸ This mode of ecological consciousness continued over time in isolated and sometimes collective motions to stem the extravagances of humanism. According to Nash, the Romans thought nothing less than granting respect and rights to the *Kingdom Animalium*. In their order of things, the *jus animalium* was a collective realm where rights and respect were a natural extension of belonging to the kingdom of creation. While this notion was animal specific, Nash suggests that by association it bestowed a respect on

⁵⁵ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 98.

⁵⁶ Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* 18-19.

⁵⁷ Eliza Marian Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany*.(Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 43.

⁵⁸ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 64.

the whole of nature.⁵⁹ Hughes likewise observes that the early Romans saw the landscape as the sacred space of the gods and would plant trees in order to please the gods.⁶⁰ In the Christian medieval period, humans and nature continued to exist in intimate alliance, and this Pepper suggests fostered the idea of nature as having rights independent from the rights of ‘man’. Membership in the Great Chain of Being implied that each link in the chain was as valuable and important as the next.⁶¹ It is of significance that this is known by historians, despite the limitation of documents from this period. Furthermore, as Hughes notes, information about changes in the medieval period are more likely to come from local histories than general ones, as local histories were usually noted in the landscape of a single district and thus noted by the local, often illiterate, people.⁶² The survival of these histories is then, even more surprising, and testifies to their significance. Evidence of the intimacy of human and other than human relations during this time is also revealed through the contemporary cosmogony, rites and festivals, which as Merchant⁶³ narrates were expressions of and instructive towards right relations with the other-than-human world.⁶⁴

Documentation of relations with and concern surrounding the other-than-human world continued in the seventeenth century. John Evelyn in his *Discourse on Forest Trees* opined that:

This [old forest] devastation is now becoming so epidemical that unless some favourable expedient offer itself, and a way be seriously and speedily resolved upon, for a future store, one of the most glorious and considerable bulwarks of this nation, will, within a short time, be totally wanting to it.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 6.

⁶⁰ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 75.

⁶¹ Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, 43.

⁶² Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* 27.

⁶³ Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 113-116.

⁶⁴ Contrast this with the rites (if we can still use this term) and festivals of today which are focused nearly entirely on gifting to select human others at the exclusion of consideration of place or other creatures in the oeconomy of life and the impacts such materialism has on these lives.

⁶⁵ John Evelyn, quoted in Richard Mabey, ed., *The Oxford Book of Nature Writing* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995), 65.

Indeed, according to Thomas, between 1770 and 1850 this concern with trees was common, as during this time it was believed that trees felt pain much like humans.⁶⁶ Such sentiment continued in the eighteenth century with Peter the Great voicing consternation at the damage being wrought on Russia's lands and his introduction of laws on wildlife conservation, soil conservation, forest protection and over-fishing.⁶⁷ Likewise, Pierre Poivre, the French commissaire intendant of Mauritius in the mid-eighteenth century, suggesting that wasting the assets of home and colonies was 'sacrilegious' and placed the 'land in servitude,'⁶⁸ advocated for preservation and restoration of the landscape. Febvre, a French historian and geographer, (1878-1956) later concluded that, "civilised man directs his exploitation of the earth with a mastery which has ceased to astonish him, but which when we reflect on it for a moment is singularly disturbing."⁶⁹

What these historical records suggest is a continuing current of ecological concern and a sustained measure of ecological consciousness. Against this, O'Neill contends that, prior to the 'environmental movement' of the 1960s, all environmental gestures were itinerant gestures, situation specific and consequently did not result in the range and networks of guidelines and policy characteristic of today. To this he adds that the co-ordinated response of Peter the Great was an exception to the broader norm:

Environmental politics and policies, as such, began only in the 1960s. Prior to that, local, national, and (on a very limited scale) international laws and treaties regulated some aspects of pollution, land use, fishing and other issues...But all of this was uncoordinated – specific policies and laws for very specific instances.⁷⁰

Challenging this, I suggest that the picture is more complicated and that the more centralised production of policy and planning documents does not, as O'Neill implies, mean an increase in ecological consciousness. The important point is that the arc of consciousness and protest carves back in the long, if speckled, hand of time. And what is important about such protest is not simply that it existed but the nature of the ecological contexts within which it existed. These were contexts which, by today's

⁶⁶ Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*.

⁶⁷ McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 349.

⁶⁸ Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* 29.

⁶⁹ Lucien Febvre, *A Geographical Introduction to History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), quoted in Hughes, *What is Environmental History?* 33.

⁷⁰ McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 349.

standards, might well appear to be flourishing places far removed from human assault. Indeed in contemporary terms Plato's '*skeleton of a sick man*' would well be the picture of glowing ecological health, perhaps rated as one of the few remaining wilderness areas or bountiful regional settings, a much valued ecological corridor for remnant wildlife and lingering tufts of native vegetation. That, the noting and the lamenting of this change by leading public intellectuals and statesmen occurred during times when nature was relatively fecund, powerful and seemingly omni-present, and that the lament of the Ancient Greeks and subsequent cultural and community figures were recorded when the ability to produce, record and store written documents has little to no comparison with today's production networks, and that such lament travelled through the ages on historical record, all seem to suggest that nature was not only of overwhelming ecological and agricultural significance during the vast sweep of history, but that nature, both in her panoramas and her details, may have functioned as much more than a picturesque backdrop, far more than a stage for ongoing human drama. We might surmise that for most of this time, nature was the measure and map of human being.

Recognising the need to exercise caution in making such claims, I also stress, that it is equally important not to make anachronistic leaps and assume that what is now was always so.⁷¹ The changes which have led to nature being compromised, controlled and mechanised, a resource for human disposal, represent a relatively recent shift in what we consider to be 'normal.'

Assault and Silence

At the end of the twentieth century, big blocks of forest stood in only three places in the world: the Amazon and Orinoco basins of South America; across northern North America from Labrador to Alaska; across northern Eurasia, from Sweden to Sakhalin.... Of this monumental forest clearance, perhaps half took place in the twentieth century. Nearly half of this was cleared in the tropics between 1960 and 1999.⁷²

⁷¹ As Pepper writes: "taking an historical perspective on the development of ideas and values it is important not to see people of earlier times as thinking in *essentially the same way* as ourselves, but merely transposed to another age. Instead we must ... attempt to 'reconstruct an earlier mental world in its own right' ... when we can do this for earlier peoples, we may find it easier to do it for ourselves, rather than assuming that our own world view is the only possible, natural and right one for all time." Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, 6.

⁷² McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 229.

In 1900 there were about 150,000 to 250,000 blue whales in the Southern Ocean; in 1989 about 500. Of fin whales, a population of perhaps 750,000 in 1900 stood at 70,000 by the time of the 1982 moratorium on whaling, and 20,000 by 1989. In previous centuries, whalers had depleted whaling grounds one after the other. In the twentieth century whalers found the mother lode of whales, and depleted it species by species.⁷³

If we compare the relative integrity of place in early antiquity through to late medieval times and the rise of distress that met with incursions on it, with the relentless siege and assault on place and its creatures in late modernity, it becomes apparent that past a historical threshold, while knowledge of such destruction has risen, the distress surrounding it has begun to fall. This fall is not due to lack of knowledge of assault, nor is it due to there not being a discourse of protest through which to speak. Rather it reflects a complex interplay of factors, the primary one being an accelerating loss of ecological consciousness and with this a loss of ecological care.

I have suggested that the critical benchmark of ecological consciousness is the degree of intimacy a culture shares with place. This intimacy derives from living in close affiliation with the land whether this be through choice or historical circumstance. Indeed it is reasonably well known, as Blaschke argues, that “people of early epochs living within a natural landscape, automatically had a natural, naive, *usually* harmonious environmental consciousness”⁷⁴ (italics added). Midgley concurs, arguing that nearly all ancient life patterns were ones of mixed communities, in which the other species were central and meaningful figures.⁷⁵ For this reason, as Weston suggests, when humans historically said ‘we’, they referred to the relationship between humans and other animals.⁷⁶ Evidence of

⁷³ McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 242. McNeill notes that all figures ultimately derive from the International Whaling Commission. Pepper reiterates the significance of a historical perspective: “For centuries we lived in harmony with our countryside.” But “in one generation everything has changed. Destruction of habitats has rapidly escalated to a disastrous level. The effect on wildlife and countryside has been devastating.” Friends of the Earth, quoted in Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, 1. From a different rationale Pepper also reasons that more knowledge is not the solution for conservation of the environment. However, his position does not question the nature and form of this knowledge but rather suggests that people do not act on knowledge due to their vested interests and outcomes which are primarily economically driven.

⁷⁴ Karl Blaschke, “Environmental History: Some Questions for a New Sub-discipline of History.” In *The Silent Countdown: Essays in European Environmental History*, edited by Peter Brimblecrombe and Christian Pfister, 68-72 (New York: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 1990), 71.

⁷⁵ Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 118.

⁷⁶ Weston, *Before Environmental Ethics*, 322.

this intimacy is found in most indigenous lore. The Hopi, for example, believed the whole universe to be “enhanced with the same breath, rocks, trees, grass, earth, all animals and human beings,”⁷⁷ while Bill Neidjii, elder of an Indigenous Australian clan, understood that “this tree same as me. This piece of ground he grow you.”⁷⁸ Hughes writes that the early farmers of Neolithic times shared the respect felt by hunter-gatherers for the wild animals and plants in their homeland “they honoured grain plant such as ‘Mother Corn’...a goddess who was regarded not just as the ‘spirit’ of grain, but also as identical with the plants themselves and their seed. Planting and harvest became the great festivals of the year.”⁷⁹ And this we may note is not because early farmers shared the same cosmogony as hunter/gatherer populations, but because, like them, they lived in intimate relation with the overwhelming presence of other-than-human life. Indeed up to late medieval times, nature was a compelling, vivid and valued presence. As Berman writes:

The view of nature which predominated in the West down to the eve of the Scientific Revolution was that of an enchanted world. Rocks, trees, rivers and clouds were all seen as wondrous, alive and human beings felt at home in this environment. The cosmos, in short, was a place of belonging.⁸⁰

Within such contexts, consciousness of change as it affects place follows from an embeddedness in place. If such change is of enough significance this inevitably changes a community’s relationship with place. The dissolution of human and other-than-human intimacy corrodes this feedback and thus corrodes ecological consciousness. Knowledge is, of course, pursued but being first and foremost an awareness and understanding of facts, theories, statistics and figures, this form of knowing is not that of one grounded in relationship to place. The mistaken assumption that ecological knowledge of this kind implies ecological consciousness, and that the wealth of such knowledge means the wealth of such consciousness, is made because we have in fact forgotten what it is to be in place. What we now take for consciousness is not so but we fail to comprehend this at the level of culture because what ecological consciousness amounts to has over time become distorted in order that it fits the new bias – the idea that objective knowledge replaces and transcends the forms of understanding and knowing that preceded it.

⁷⁷ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 26.

⁷⁸ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 21.

⁷⁹ Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 25.

⁸⁰ Morris Berman, *The Re-enchantment of the World* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 16.

Where widespread awareness (of data or facts) is mistaken for ecological consciousness and where this knowing is not challenged by alternate forms of knowing, the search for ever more information continues making alternate knowing less and less available. This is exacerbated by the changes in the means of producing, storing and disseminating information. With changes emerging at first slowly with the arrival of Gutenberg's printing press, with Luther nailing his 95 theses to the chapel door and Samuel Morse asking "What hath God wrought?" the pace is now exponentially rapid. "The beginnings of the new world," as Neil Roberts writes, "signified a time of "dramatic and accelerating change."⁸¹ In recent times electronic technologies have morphed and multiplied knowledge distribution, populating, desks, laps, and palms worldwide. Alexander Bell's simple contraption soon became the ubiquitous mobile, and television, vision at a distance, now increases that distance to near every possible corner of the earth while the initially sophisticated typewriter morphed into wildly formatting word packages and instantly linking nets.

As a result, our social space is drenched in language that repackages such information, advocating sustainability, green living, animal rights, Earth First! Our world is one that advances and encourages innumerable conferences, summits, United Nation's delegations on the environment. Yet, as Weston, writing now twenty two years ago, ironically and sadly observes, this is the world where "three dozen species have become extinct in the United States in the past decade just waiting for Endangered Species Act designation."⁸²

In the first decades of the twenty-first century still more environmental statistics, reports and policies are being produced. More is known about, and written on, the increasingly fraught state of environmental degradation. But this does not give way to a deepening ecological consciousness. Indeed, as Pepper comments:

...a study of the facts alone seems to lead nowhere. Scores of books have been written about these facts – of chronic imbalances in population/resource ratios, of ecologically damaging technology, of wasteful consumption patterns – such that substantial acreages of forest must have been consumed in the process. Yet one can legitimately argue that little change of a truly fundamental nature has been achieved by the environmental movement. The spread of detailed knowledge

⁸¹ Neil Roberts, quoted in Hughes, *An Environmental History of the World*, 109.

⁸² Anthony Weston, *Back to Earth: Tomorrow's Environmentalism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 86.

about how man degrades and threatens his own planet has not of itself produced the likelihood of serious or permanent remedial action.⁸³

Testimony to this is not only the lack of distress and protest as far as the great majority of western populations are concerned but also analogously the lack of knowing and concern surrounding such changes as evidenced in daily practises of consumption and ‘development’ that have ongoing devastating effects on place. While this does not imply that the current glut of information is without its uses, it suggests that to achieve change different ways of knowing and relating to the other-than-human world are needed. We also need a longer-term anthropological, sociological, philosophical and ecological study than that which has to date been available in the tracing of ecological consciousness.

Key to any such endeavour is a consideration of what remains silenced in place, what remains untold, the stories of the serfs, peasants and fisher people who shared intimate, sometimes ravaging, sometimes bountiful, daily alliances with the land. And beyond this, the stories of the many Indigenous peoples whose kinship with place cannot be accurately expressed in the language that is at our disposal. Their relationship with place remains historically uncharted. Such stories perhaps contain the oldest seeds of modern day environmentalism. Seeds which long lost to the wind, buried beneath concrete, may have taken millennia to bear fruit.

The paradox is that to dig for these seeds we need to know that such digging is required but to know this is to know that we are unaware of what we have lost. And to know of unknowing is a difficult task, it is to know that our cultural amnesia is fed by shifts in the baseline.

The Shifting Baseline

I have suggested that when considered from a long term historical perspective, environmental protest is shown to be not a novel phenomenon. I have also proposed that when the scale and scope of current destruction is taken into account, the protest of today is not particularly widespread by historical standards. Where it exists it does so, not as primarily a visceral response to place. Rather, modern environmental protest is by and large a response to a particular form of knowledge. This is knowledge that is not

⁸³ Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, 3.

grounded in relationship to place but is embedded in cultural narratives that tell stories of the self as separate from place.

What is helpful in understanding this diminishing ecological consciousness and lack of awareness of change is a phenomena that Daniel Pauly refers to as the shifting baseline syndrome. In essence the shifting baseline syndrome explains the way in which beliefs and perceptions can come to be informed by a distorted idea of the normal. This is not to suggest that an ultimate ‘normal’ and by association ‘good’ exists, but rather to draw attention to the fact that we anchor our beliefs and perceptions in shifting ground. Further this terrain has been shifting for a long time. If we fail to notice such shifts we will fail to establish a clear vision of cultural and ecological realities. Applying the shifting baseline syndrome to environmental protest and protection can help us to see that the framework and spaces we are in are something other than what we take them to be. Further, within this model there is a knock-on effect where each misrepresentation responds to and reinforces the next and thus reinforces the mindset, behaviours and the spaces that perpetuate crisis.

Pauly first described the shifting baseline syndrome in 1995, in the postscript of a paper titled *Anecdotes and the Shifting Baseline of Fisheries*.⁸⁴ There he describes the way the baseline of fisheries has shifted over time so as to inaccurately reflect the size and species composition of current fish stocks. As he reflects:

Essentially, this syndrome has arisen because each generation of fisheries scientists accepts as a baseline the stock size and species composition that occurred at the beginning of their careers, and uses this to evaluate changes. When the next generation starts its career, the stocks have further declined, but it is the stocks at that time that serve as a new baseline. The result obviously is a gradual shift of the baseline, a gradual accommodation of the creeping disappearance of resource species, and inappropriate reference points for evaluating economic losses resulting from overfishing, or for identifying targets for rehabilitation measures.⁸⁵

This inaccuracy, Pauly observes, is created, or partly created, by a lack of attention paid to historical, anecdotal data. Given the historical recency of the scientific method and the printing press it is safe to assume that most long-term historical data is in fact

⁸⁴ Daniel Pauly, “Anecdotes and the Shifting Baseline of Fisheries,” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 10, no. 10 (1995): 430.

⁸⁵ Pauly, “Anecdotes and the Shifting Baseline of Fisheries,” 430.

anecdotal, as is much of today's non-recorded data.⁸⁶ Pauly does not theorize as to why there is no attention paid to this type of evidence but I assume that it is because such anecdotal data does not fit into the current scientific paradigm and corresponding definition of what data actually is, this itself reflecting a baseline shift in the cultural legitimacy of knowledge. This broad dismissal of anecdotal evidence is accompanied by a particular disinterest in the long hand of time and the epistemological implications of such assessment for ecological 'health' today. Such dismissal suggests that in any given historical analysis seminal epistemological and ecological difference either did not exist or if it did it is irrelevant to the case at hand as it existed alongside so many other differences so as to make its analysis redundant.

Pauly concludes that "frameworks that maximize the use of fisheries history would help us to understand and to overcome – in part at least – the shifting baselines syndrome, and hence to evaluate the true social and ecological costs of fisheries."⁸⁷ Even more fundamentally, what the shifting baseline syndrome reveals is that we have little awareness of how unhelpful the current ecological 'norm' is as an indicator of ecological 'health' or stability, given that it is based on a short term perception while lasting ecological changes are produced over the historical long term. Likewise we have little understanding of how our current epistemological norm suppresses other ways of knowing that may be seminal to ecological and epistemological change. My suggestion is that Pauly's principle, while first utilised for ecological checkpoints, translates to the naming of a range of cultural amnesias and on a more fundamental level speaks to the way in which the separation of ways of knowing and being from embeddedness in, and relationship to place, remains all but completely undetected in our cultural psyche. It is for this reason that the Gilbert White mode of being in place, as cited earlier, while once considered the norm is now seen as an idealistic and irrational alternative. Indeed it could be argued that the baseline has shifted to the point of near dissolution and as such the possibility that we live in a distorted manner in a distorted world is not available to our consciousness. Where questions of distortion and dysfunction are raised they are done in a way that cites the cause as material and the distortion as discrete. What is the subject of protest/discord is not the culture itself but singular acts within this culture.

⁸⁶ I am here referring to the data from the historical record, not, the data collected today (through various methods including carbon dating), that tells us about certain changes in the past.

⁸⁷ Pauly, "Anecdotes and the Shifting Baseline of Fisheries," 430.

Consequently questions about the fundamental severance of person and community from place, questions regarding the nature and responsibility in human *being*, are the very questions that do not get asked. These are the ‘magnificent’ questions that Hamilton suggests humans have always asked and, as I will later discuss, these are the questions that now, due to their purely discursive and thus meaningless form, are almost unaskable:

What is the nature of our Being? Why should we behave morally? Are we saved or condemned by our rationality? They are in truth the oldest questions, the ones that in every epoch press themselves forward. Yet in our era they have been ruled invalid ...have been expelled from public discourse, so that to even pose them today invites ridicule.⁸⁸

Returning to the more immediate discussion of ecological destruction we can see through the shifting baseline model not only how destruction has become the norm but also how environmental protest and the science of ecology are ineffective in its redress, married as they are to their own shifting baselines of what it is to be a self, what it is to know and what it is to be in place.

We will now turn to the next chapter in this history, that of the Romantics, who, in their attempts to define and defend wild nature, inadvertently perpetuated the existential, epistemological and ethical distance that later environmentalists would inhabit.

⁸⁸ Hamilton, “*Reclaiming Morality from Conservative Dogma and Post-Modern Indifference*,” <http://clivehamilton.com/reclaiming-morality-from-conservative-dogma-and-post-modern-indifference/>.

Chapter Two

The Wilderness of Civilized Thought

It has thus far been argued that by the time ecology emerged as a science, separation from the other than human world had already become the norm. At the threshold of this change was the pastor/naturalist Gilbert White. For White, theological and place-bound sympathies were united. However, post-White, ecology would transform, on the one hand, into a science aiming to control, manage and fashion to its own ends the ‘resources’ of nature and, on the other, into a movement setting out to protest such control and reduction. This splintering, like most fractures, was not clean-cut and each half contained within it the seeds and the sentiments of the union from which it had burst forth. Thus the Romanticism that beckoned from the Arcadian impulse characterised in Gilbert White, while advocating unity with and sympathy for the natural world, was at the same time a child of the enlightenment that depended on and promulgated some of the core values of enlightenment thought, values which promoted and engendered separation and division.¹ It is this working contradiction that forms part of the explanation as to why the environment movement born from this soil fails to produce real change.

A key element of the environmental protest movement is, of course, the individual and his/her capacity to protest. The new found individualism supported by the logic of enlightenment thinking came to fruition in the French Revolution, a revolution that

¹ McGilchrist notes that the “best of Enlightenment values were not negated but *aufgehoben* by Romanticism, and persist not only into the coming era, but in fact to this day.” Ian McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 352. While I would contest whether the *best* Enlightenment values were transferred and whether the eliciting of a comparative scale is helpful in a movement whose values were particularly cohesive, the tenacity of Enlightenment thought through various incarnations is of seminal importance for understanding the nature of Romanticism and subsequent cultural developments.

overthrew centuries of hierarchical, externally ordained oppression and welcomed in with both passion and terror the reign of the 'people', or perhaps more precisely the person, the citizen, the individual and the collection of these that became the 'nation.' The core values, that the revolution championed as 'rights' of such individuals, were those of liberty, equality and fraternity, with significant emphasis on the individual's will and right to self-expression in all its forms.

It is easy to forget that this was not always so, given that the self is now the axis of all endeavour, meaning and purpose and we live immersed in a culture that promotes obsessive preoccupation with the self. Yet when the Romantics retreated into and rallied for the self as an ethical and epistemological authority, the celebration of the self was a novel and largely unprecedented phenomena. The new centrality of the self was moved along by the influence of other social changes, including the fragmentations articulated by Enlightenment science, the rise of industry and capitalism and the Protestant Reformation's challenge to the spiritual authority claimed by church leaders. In this respect the Romantics were part of the changes they resisted. However at the same time they stood against them. For a key focus of these cultural transitions was the emergence of a culture dominated by the claims of rational and de-personalised thought, a rejection of personal feelings and subjective 'knowing.' Opposing this was the Romantics' self-claimed-self, as the seat of meaning and value. In this they made a significant and important deviation from the new world order replete with its reason-driven quest for mastery and control over all spheres, including that of individual emotions and sentiment. The Romantics then, in some respects, stood alone literally and metaphorically on the shores of an increasingly mechanized and alienating culture.

However the limitation of this celebrated, individual self is that s/he is an entity that is by definition separate from all that is not-self. As a result, and despite the best of intentions, the very advance of this self, promotes the dominant culture that casts human being outside of other-than-human relations and ultimately, as a consequence of this logic, outside of inter-human relations. The division that characterised the Romantic Movement was one therefore where the individual became increasingly separated from place, from community, from certain aspects of society and the very sense of belonging

to the other-than-human world. In so doing Romanticism helped produce and promote the ‘cult of the self.’²

Marking the Baseline of the Self

In making a radical break with the Gilbert White model of community as inclusive of human and other-than-human life, this new delineation of, and focus on, the self, fractured the bonds of community as found in place. Further, it implied, in the process, that knowledge is not to be found through relationship with community and place (including knowledge of the good) but is instead sourced in individual reflection/study and research. In the Romantic interpretation, this produced a self that was in ethical and epistemological dialogue, not with others, but solely with her own inner demons and desires. For the Romantics, this was a seminal development, since the Romantic journey in its existential depths of agony and ecstasy was a resolutely solitary one. Indeed the soulful, deeply introspective and unique journey of each individual was an ideal the Romantic model depended upon. It was the “uninhibited expression of man’s (sic) own individuality” which according to Diderot, allowed for self-realization, a key Romantic goal.³

In carving out this niche, the Romantic individual looked not to what was rule bound and principle driven, the world of reason and rationality, but to the world of the imagination and the emotions. Disenchanted with the domination of a mechanized and excessively cerebral rationality, and equally disenchanted with the Revolution’s failure to deliver the liberty, equality and fraternity it espoused, the Romantics found in the passionate, fluid, turbulent and fermenting world of emotions an alternative aesthetic, ethical and epistemological source. This short historical renaissance gave the emotions and the imagination a long awaited epistemological authority. As Schenz writes, during this period, the “battle against reason, the prime enchantress, was fought all over Europe,”⁴ at the same time, the leading Polish Romantic Mickiewicz, declared that feeling and faith had more appeal for him than the eye and the magnifying glass of the

² Maurice Cranston, *The Romantic Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 54, where Cranston discusses this evolution.

³ Diderot, quoted in Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 19.

⁴ Hans George Artur Viktor Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics: An Essay in Cultural History* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1966), 2.

wise man.⁵ Coleridge likewise testified that deep thinking was attainable only by someone of deep feeling.⁶ One of the key contexts through which the individual accessed communion with the soul's truth and found exposure to, what was often seen as the external geography of extreme emotional experience, was through the mysterious, terror laden, awe-inspiring and atmospherically potent idea and ideal of the Wild. In this way the Romantics fostered alongside the cult of the self a 'cult of nature'⁷ as a source of self-realization and a welcome alternative to the dehumanising and machinating forces of eighteenth and nineteenth century industrialism. The squalor, noise, grime, ugliness, and patterns of repetitive soulless predictability found in urban industrial life was all that the Romantic spirit abhorred and rallied against. Not only was this terrain and the civilization which it was home to, stifling, ugly and oppressive it was also considered a vortex of moral and spiritual contamination. Maurice Cranston examines the way in which this dichotomy unravelled in the Romantic imagination and literature, observing that "Blake's two sets of songs illustrate a theme which was central to [his and] Rousseau's thinking, the contrast between the goodness of nature and the corruption of civilisation."⁸

Yet this contrast was not one between a debauched culture and an ethically instructive and informative nature. The 'goodness' of nature was not a utilitarian nor what we would perhaps understand as an ethical goodness, rather it was purely symbolic. As such, it was not a source of ethical instruction or guidance, all ethical detail of this kind had to be unwrapped in the self. The contrast then for the Romantics was one between a culture that had lost its 'ground of value'⁹ – a convincing meaning-making framework that orientated one to the good - and the presence of nature as a symbol of purity, sanctity and ultimate truth. Nature was seen as a source of the absolute in a culture that had lost, through the moral, social and spiritual failures of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and Christianity, the claim to the absolute. As Peckham explains, what the Enlightenment promulgated was the idea that the right and the good were, like the workings of nature, objects of knowledge that would become the more apparent the

⁵ Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, 2.

⁶ Schenk, *The Mind of the European Romantics*, 4.

⁷ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 54.

⁸ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 54.

⁹ Morse Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), 36-57.

more the 'secrets' of nature were known and were harnessed to human ends. The Enlightenment promise and project therefore was to reveal the complete workings and order of the world and in so doing restore, value, harmony, peace and meaning to society. The violent failure of the ethical and social dimensions of this project were dramatically revealed in the French Revolution, a revolution that in promising liberty, equality and fraternity ultimately produced tyranny, oppression and bloodshed. What this failure made apparent is that there was a lack of symmetry between an understanding of the order of nature and the value and purpose that was thought to constitute human life and human knowledge. Uncovering the order of nature therefore could not and did not result in a revelation of social and moral order, peace and harmony, but to the contrary such uncovering hence gave way to unprecedented, violent conflict. This produced, in the Romantics, a spiritual alienation from what was seen as a disturbing and chaotic civilisation, one that could not be a model for a good and meaningful life.¹⁰ The initial response to this, Peckham argues, was negative Romanticism, an initial, bleak form of Romanticism that saw the world, nature and man as devoid of value. However, as Peckham notes, this could not be psychologically sustained without reverting to pre-enlightenment explanations or turning a blind eye to Enlightenment failings. Subsequently, the Romantics turned to the self as the source of all meaning, purpose and value. To access this purpose and value however one needed to secede from the corrupt, clouding and disorientating effect of 'civilisation' and seek clarity, insight and inspiration from the truth and thus 'goodness' of nature. Hence nature, in remaining 'other' both to culture and to this cultural failure, became for the Romantics a spiritual alternative, one that enabled access to the noumenal that was both within and beyond the self.

Wilderness as 'Other'

This nature for the Romantics was the wild or the wilderness, the antithesis of civilization and an object of reverential and religious focus. Rousseau, an early

¹⁰ For further analysis of this see Peckham's description of the way in which the Romantic's inner turn was an outcome of the tyranny, oppression and bloodshed that the Revolution produced. The disillusionment at broken Revolutionary and Enlightenment ideals fed, Peckham argues, the Romantic's positioning of themselves as far away as possible from prevailing social norms, conventions and structures and their focus on the self as the solely reliable ethical, aesthetic and epistemological authority.

Romantic, in having what Cranston describes as ‘the temperament of a worshipper,’ displayed this, given that he worshipped that “which was to take the place of God for many later Romantics, and which he himself identified with God, namely nature, – nature in those forms least touched by the hand of man, high mountains and deep forests and windswept lakes.”¹¹

However, in this regard, the Romantics were not in fact novel for, as Nash reminds us,¹² ideas of the wild and the wilderness have been perpetuated throughout the history of western civilisation. These ideas have always been imbued with mythic, moral and symbolic significance, alternating between casting the wild as an object of fear, terror and repulsion or, to the contrary, one of purity, sanctity and awe. In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, an astute historical analysis of the story of wilderness since the approximate beginnings of western civilisation, Nash describes the way in which wilderness has been shaped according to the changing geographical, theological and epistemological forces that have dominated at any given time. In so doing he elucidates the way in which notions of the ‘wild’ or the ‘wilderness’ have always been indicative of a set of feelings and attitudes as much as they have gestured towards actual geographical places. Indeed in the infancy of western civilisation the wild spoke more of a feeling – one of fear and horror – than it did of a discrete place. This is in part due to the fact that the formative idea of the wilderness referred not so much to the material space we today define as wilderness: “A large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition,”¹³ as to a reckless and powerful nature and the will of an avenging or rewarding God. Nash, in describing the early Hebraic conception of the wilderness, observes that “an unusually dry season would wither crops and turn arable land to desert. In these circumstances men naturally hated and feared the wilderness.”¹⁴ Here wilderness is a hostile condition which climatically descended on what was formerly an inhabitable and thus friendly land. Rather than referring to a specific place it was in this sense primarily adjectival, describing a

¹¹ Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism*, 16.

¹² Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 8-23.

¹³ IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), *About IUCN*; “Conserving Nature: WCPA Biomes – Wilderness,” http://www.iucn.org/about/work/programmes/gpap_home/gpap_biodiversity/gpap_wcpabiodiv/gpap_wilderness/ (last modified January 16, 2014).

¹⁴ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 14.

wasteland, a dry, *inhospitable* region, a familiar yet mercenary place made unliveable by a “curse dispensed by the divine power in order to show his displeasure.”¹⁵

Wilderness in these early renderings thus took the form of a capricious and powerful Nature holding a vulnerable human fate in her unpredictable hands. The explanation that gave sense to such benighted conditions and what was perceived as a humanly ill-fitted circumstance was the wisdom of an all-powerful deity exercising ‘His’ will through nature’s extremes. This was not, consequently, a nature to be loved but one to be feared. It was a place that offered little mortal comfort. While the wilderness as ‘threatening other’ incrementally became the modern, geographically remote and/or liminal place, in either case – whether describing a place where human life *cannot* flourish or *is not* flourishing – it is a place that is decidedly not, now or ever, the home of human being.

This sentiment reached its apotheosis in medieval Europe, merging as it did with the superstitious and enchanted temper of the time.¹⁶ Yet what is most illuminating about the medieval conception of the wild is not that it was populated with goblins, trolls, elves and warlocks and still ‘wilder creatures of the imagination,’ but the nature of the ethical and spiritual threat that the wilderness held for human being. The wilderness was a place where one needed to maintain not only physical but spiritual and moral distance from its unknown dangers and devils. While at times this mything was interspersed by representations of the wilderness as a monkish source of spiritual catharsis this did not override the dominant sentiment that wilderness, far from being a spiritual sanctuary, was a place of ethical and spiritual corruption, threatening to appropriate, distort and deform one’s very humanity. This was due to the fact that in the medieval imagination the wilderness was a patently Godless terrain.¹⁷ In presenting nothing that approximated a Christian sense of order, value and understanding, the wilderness was disconnected from the human. Insofar as this was the case and insofar as God’s way was the path to the true and the good the wilderness was a demonstrably corrupting territory. Such perceptions took ethical knowing further and further from relationship with place and repositioned the ethical and spiritual centre more resolutely in specific human community, and eventually, singularly in the self.

¹⁵ Johannes Pedersen, cited in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 14.

¹⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*.

¹⁷ Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: A Study in Art, Sentiment and Demonology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952).

In the forsaken ground of the wilderness, 'man' could be returned, it was believed, to the state of the 'savage', barbarous and without bounds.¹⁸ The medieval wilderness apprehension was in this regard driven not so much by concerns over ferocious bears, wolves and serpents as with the spectre of those distorted beasts that had appropriated something of the human. Nash notes that "many of the medieval European monsters were lineal descendants of the man-beasts of classical mythology," including ... "Pan, the lord of the woods ... pictured as having the legs, ears and tail of a goat and the body of a man" as well as "the tribe of satyrs – goat-men of a demoniacal character devoted to wine, dancing and lust" who appeared "only at night and then solely in the darkest parts of the forest ... ravished women and carried off children who ventured into their wilderness lairs" and Sileni and centaurs monsters who had "the torso and head of a man and the body, legs and tail of a horse."¹⁹ Expanding on this, he observes that:

...the most important imaginary denizen of the wildernesses of medieval Europe was the semi-human Wild Man. His naked figure, covered completely with thick hair, appeared widely in the art, literature and drama of the period ... According to folk tradition the Wild Man lived in the heart of the forest as far as possible from civilization. He was regarded as a kind of ogre who devoured children and ravished maidens.²⁰

He also had a mate whose character:

...varied from place to place ... In the Austrian Tyrol and Bavarian Alps, the Wild Woman was imagined to have enormous size, pendulous breasts, and a hideous mouth that stretched from ear to ear ... Her principle offense was stealing human babies and leaving her own offspring in their place.²¹

All this suggests that the 'wild' and the home where the wild roamed, the wilderness, were states and places to be avoided, shunned and, if possible, eradicated. Equally embedded in this worldview is a choice between the 'wild' and the 'civilised.' A middle ground or synthesis is not possible, for in the fashion of the primordial forces of good versus evil one will win out. You can, as a human, be civilised or become beast, the 'wild-man'. Such a 'man' is recognisably human but only in a physical capacity and only

¹⁸ Joep Leersen, "Wildness, Wilderness and Ireland: Medieval and Early Modern Patterns in the Demarcation of Civility," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 1 (1995): 25-39.

¹⁹ Nash in this narrative also observes that "The word "panic" originated from the blinding fear that seized travellers upon hearing strange cries in the wilderness and assuming them to signify Pan's approach." Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 11.

²⁰ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 11.

²¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 11-13.

insofar as such recognition serves as a warning of the dangers the wilderness holds. At no point is there any suggestion of a moral or spiritual kinship with the 'wild-man'. As Bernheimer points out, wilderness:

...implied everything that eluded Christian norms and the established framework of Christian society, referring to what was uncanny, unruly, unpredictable, foreign, uncultured and uncultivated. It included the unfamiliar as well as the unintelligible.²²

This is why wilderness was often regarded with both physical and spiritual apprehension if not Pan-ic. One could not merge with the wilderness as the wild would always threaten to engulf the human and revert it to a primordial state, wilderness in this context, be it populated by goblins and warlocks or by tigers and wolves, is the opposite of civilisation, it is overwhelmingly all that civilisation is not. Being human and civilized meant being separate from and superior to nature's chaos and perhaps more importantly it meant that one *knew* of this separation and superiority. To lose such knowing is to enter the wilderness.

If one falls from grace into the underworld of the wilderness one loses the defining feature of one's humanity. If, on the other hand, one conquers the wilderness, the victory is spiritual and moral. Conquest of wilderness becomes a conquest of the savage, the uncouth, chaotic and unpredictable. It is a championing of civilisation, its projections and values. Here, Cronon observes, is the ongoing danger in the cultural mapping of wilderness, for it does not release us from, but reinforces, cultural bias. While on a superficial level it is generally believed to be:

...a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. [...it is in fact a...] product of that civilization ... we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationship with the nonhuman world, for [the idea of] wilderness itself is no small part of the problem.²³

Wilderness through its ancient, medieval and subsequent Romantic incarnations is clearly a concept premised on distance, both geo-physical and conceptual, far from the familiar, the safe and predictable, far from what is known. When we consider the historical transition of the wilderness from the Hebraic version that Nash describes

²² Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*, 20.

²³ William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), 69-70.

where it is a place of physical death and decay subject to Yahweh's command,²⁴ to the medieval version where it is a patently Godless terrain and thus a place of ethical death and decay, the extent to which wilderness illuminates cultural fears, anxieties and projections becomes apparent. It is no accident that within these accounts the Hebraic wilderness, the desert, is a land where 'man' is figuratively and literally exposed, awaiting redemption from the moral and spiritual sins he has committed as manifested in the wilderness condition of the land, while the medieval wilderness, to the contrary, is a deep, impenetrable forest, a place where darkness and danger linger, a place clearly defined from the known the visible and the Godly. This transition can be better understood when we examine the dual narrative that accompanies the story of the wilderness, that is, the story of the garden.

Behind the early Hebraic and Christian roots of moral and mortal Pan-ic is the silent narrative of 'culture' travelling in its wake. This is suggested first in the land of Canaan "the Promised Land of milk and honey,"²⁵ appropriate to good Hebraic life. Although this is an early Hebraic suggestion, escape from the earth's wilderness or from the very earth *as* wilderness has earlier literary references. As Crouse cites, the narratives of Homer and Virgil are both explorations of the 'pilgrimage' and journey man must make from a place of exile, hardship and suffering (earth) to one of homecoming, peace and rest (heaven). Earth as a mechanism to assist this journey can help reveal the divine truth but in no sense is earth ever the final or proper resting place. This is again reinforced by Plato's well known idealism, the imperfect reflections of reality that populate earthly existence and the belief that it is for the human soul to "hold converse with the divine, immortal and everlasting world to which she is akin," disencumbering herself of all "that wild profusion of rock and shell whose earthly substance has encrusted her."²⁶ These sources reveal that what is at stake here is a deep cultural premise, one that finds its most lasting metaphor in the Garden. The garden as the place of human refuge and belonging, would both as a metaphor and as an increasing geographical reality, persist and intensify over time. At the same time, the cultural and moral logic giving rise to this, would come to legitimate the ongoing, systematic and often systemic, devastation and destruction of 'wild' places. Yet, while the places and

²⁴ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 13-20.

²⁵ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 16.

²⁶ Plato, *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1941), 345-346.

creatures under assault are real what is driving their assault is not the real presence of threat but a figurative motif deeply embedded in the cultural imagination. The conception of such creatures as ‘wild’ and such places as ‘wilderness’ and perhaps more importantly as not-garden are fundamental to a culture premised on the separation of the human from the earth and, in this, the other-than-human world.

Mapping the Garden

The garden was first incorporated into the cultural psyche with the Garden of Eden motif, a paradise found and necessarily lost. With such loss, the eternal quest was to find such paradise once more, implying a perpetual restlessness and dissatisfaction with the Earth’s given conditions as not the rightful human conditions. That ‘man’ was cast out of these conditions after the Fall takes on a credible and real explanatory focus for the exiled Hebraic people, but its meaning is also symbolic. For the curse that original sin imposes on mankind for eternity is the transition from a place of innocence, grace and eternal life to knowledge of the nature of the human. In knowing our mortality, in self-consciousness we are fallen and it is this that simultaneously and symbolically becomes both the curse and definition of human being. The project therefore is to rise from this fallen condition, to be redeemed, saved, repentant – to ‘know’ otherwise. Knowing otherwise, means overcoming one’s mortality, overcoming that which threatens to take us away from the appropriate garden setting and cast us as vulnerable beings into the wilderness:

After the fall, the paradise of delights which was Eden [was] turned to wilderness, man is in exile from his patria, condemned to journey as an alien through desert places, where man and nature are at enmity.²⁷

‘Nature’ in this setting is the mortal and material world that ‘man’ is pitched against. That the wilderness is mythed as, and therefore becomes, foreign, unknown and as such dangerous makes it a place where human life is in fact less than safe; yet this physical threat is not the prime offence. The primary offence is ‘mans’ vulnerability *per-se* and the wilderness as symbolic of this becomes forsaken ground. Conquering the wilderness is

²⁷ Robert. D. Crouse, “The Earth as Wilderness and Paradise in Medieval Christian Thought,” In *Replenish the Earth: The Christian Theology of Nature. A Theological Conference Held at Christchurch Cathedral Hall, Fredericton, New Brunswick, June 9-12, 1991*, edited by Susan Harris (Charlottetown, PE: St Peter’s Publications, 1992), <http://www.stpeter.org/crouse/writings/wilderness.htm>, para. 22.

then a moral and spiritual necessity. It is what verifies the human, and the human must be verified for 'man' can never return to Eden, self-consciousness cannot be severed from the human condition. Rather, this consciousness and knowledge is to be used, to overcome the limited, mortal condition. One must not look back to Eden but forward to the day when one can be restored to one's full humanity and the soul finds its rightful resting place.²⁸

When we return to the historical narrative we see that, over time, the garden evolved from being the Hebrew's physical place, a promised *land* to a spiritual place, the heaven of medieval Christians. This was partly due to the fact that the medieval period was a time not of exile but of Christian dominion. It was also a time when nature was under reasonable domestic control, where life was more assured. From this vantage point the Promised Land need not be a place on earth but the preferred and appropriate, everlasting, spiritual home. The focus of any pious Christian was therefore not on the beauty, majesty and immensity of nature but on the inward-gazing life and care of the soul. This was the only reality and all that would endure beyond this world into the next. As a result, the world and its beauty, became irrelevant and often a detrimental distraction to the proper task and purpose of humankind.²⁹

In therefore, all versions, the garden is the place where 'man' does not physically live but is the place where 'he' rightfully belongs. Such a garden is not, was never and never can be the wilderness. The wilderness to the contrary is the place where 'man' is lost, condemned or purged. This is no less apparent today, except that the garden is no longer a heavenly abode but a cerebral terrain, somewhat ironically, the literal garden of knowledge itself.

Knowledge in modernity has become the final refuge, it is both the source and definition of human being. It is the virtual place where we flee from earth's constraints and reposition ourselves as unrestrained and infinite. This knowledge is not, however, the subjective kind of the Romantics, it has no recourse to the fluid terrains of the emotions and the imagination. Rather, this knowledge parades as objective and in response positions the world as object. It is classifiable, verifiable and quantifiable

²⁸ This future focused ideology is that which at least partly informs the mantra of progress that defines modern capitalist, industrial society, an approach that has its source in a need to escape from the present, from the earth and from the limits and boundaries of finitude.

²⁹ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

knowledge, it is knowledge that names, manipulates and manages the 'other'. Within this framework the mystery and latent possibilities of mortal and moral decay that lurked in medieval wilderness have been eroded. They have been epistemologically conquered. The scientific nomenclature used in modernity to describe the fore-named *wilderness* reflects this dominion, these areas are now variously named "old growth forest," "bio-diversity region," "Class A Marine Park," amidst a range of classificatory terms that describe an epistemological colony. Wilderness is rarely now used in a moral sense, except by environmental groups, campaigning to summon an emotive, Romantic response of old. Thus, while wilderness is now threatened by culture, it no longer itself poses a threat to culture. The garden reigns.

Wilderness as Spiritual Renewal

I have suggested that the wilderness through the long hand of time has been primarily mythed as a presence that both defines and threatens the 'garden'. Yet there were, and remain, alternative renderings. Chief among these is the notion of wilderness as a space of spiritual renewal and enlightenment. Nash observes that the notion of the wilderness as a place of catharsis and enlightenment began with the Exodus of the Jewish people from their homeland and their consequent roaming of the desert for forty years, during which time Moses received the Ten Commandments on the Mount. The safety from a punitive society and the spiritual clarity and moral instruction consequent upon such removal, became a powerful symbol for the Hebrew and consequently Christian faith. It is Nash's view that this "Exodus experience established a tradition of going to the Wilderness for freedom and the purification of faith."³⁰

For Christians, the wilderness as a place of spiritual catharsis, was reinforced by Jesus' visit to the desert and his emergence with the word of God.³¹ This established a long standing tradition that included sacred pilgrimages, the voluntary seclusion of monks, and the communion of certain figures, such as St Francis of Assisi, with the birds, the bees and the soul of nature.³² This notion of the cathartic role of wilderness, was one

³⁰ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 16.

³¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 16-20.

³² For a detailed discussion on St Francis, see Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (London: Routledge, 2004).

the Romantics wove into their wilderness dream. Yet it is, we must remember, a notion extracted from the garden. The Romantic wilderness is no more known, and is as imaginatively constructed and as much the 'other' as it was for the Hebrews in the desert and for the medieval townspeople running from Pan. The nature it presents is not Selborne, it is not intimate, and it is not lived in and is not kin.

Indeed, for the Romantics it was seminal that nature should remain *unknown*. Knowing would not only diminish the concentration of the passions but it would break the very metaphor of wilderness, for when one ventures into the wilderness, one ventures into a metaphorical as much as a geographical space. The Romantic wilderness experience is a venture into the great 'unknown' in order that one may come to know *oneself*, sometimes one's culture, more fully.

In this exploration, one must pitch oneself against the vast, mysterious blanket of the other, so that the image of the self becomes visible in relief. To forge an actual relationship with nature, to know and understand her on her own terms, means the boundaries of the self would merge and the 'unique' individual self, remain invisible. Therefore the intellectual and spiritual journey to understand or know the wild is not made, for it is categorically mysterious, sacred, other. Outside the cultural hall of mirrors it is that which can tell us about ourselves. The necessary qualities of the Romantic wilderness are therefore those of scale, depth and difference, with ideas of the wild and the wilderness capturing a vast panorama of awe inspiring proportions. It is that which is precisely not human in scale let alone micro-floric. The Romantic wild captures the imagination, the heart, the moral sensibility, not the botanists, the biologists or the ornithologist's detailed, investigative, order making sensibility. If such scale and depth are broached then the very Romantic project of self-realization is lost. This is why the sublime, the tremendous and the terrible are such key ingredients in Romantic thought, it is through these that the Romantic self is transported and transcended to another realm of being, to the deepest recesses of the soul and the heights of ecstatic communion. Such transportation cannot be delivered through the proximity and complexity of everyday relationships.

As Mc Gilchrist points out:

...vast distances evoked by visual depth, grand objects and perspectives, become of great significance, because of their metaphoric power to express a sense of

ineffability, which is experienced physically and emotionally as much as conceptually.³³

The enchantment with the distant also extends to the past, by which the Romantics are ‘captivated,’³⁴ and again in the gaping void that marks unrequited love, enjoyed for the depths to which it plunges the longing soul.³⁵ Separation from an idealised idea of union, tragic in most instances, is what informs the Romantic experience of awe, longing and romance. The drudgery, familiarity and predictability of the ordinary and the accessible are not part of the romantic experience and obliterate the romantic self, indeed the very point of the sublime and terrible is that in transporting one it takes one *away from* a pedestrian reality. Within these ideational perimeters it is neither plausible nor desirable that the wilderness be known or understood in any way that suggests access to the detail and dirt of its presence.³⁶ Indeed Edmund Burke an English Romantic promoted not-knowing as a key aesthetic and imaginative priority, claiming that it is our “ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions” a clear idea, he asserted “...is another name for a little idea.”³⁷

Peckham suggests that the sense of distance and mystery the wilderness held, was necessary not only because it shaped the Romantic imagination, but because the Wild was, at the time, the only, and indeed the best, phenomenal means to a noumenal end. It functioned for the Romantics as a link to the enduring and the divine, both within the self and beyond the visible world. This was a link that was otherwise largely unavailable due to the spiritual failings of the modern age. The ‘wild’ thus, could not be engaged with in a substantive and nuanced way, for to do so would threaten this link. It was

³³ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 363.

³⁴ McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, 366.

³⁵ These depths were dramatized by Goethe’s protagonist Werther in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Werther’s non-consummated longing for the married Lotte, culminates in the appropriate Romantic conclusion of suicide. The success of Goethe’s novel in capturing this Romantic sensibility, quite astoundingly, set off a spate of Werther-like suicides in 18th century Germany.

³⁶ While the great romantic poets such as Keats, Yeats, and Blake did document the beauty of nature in all her details this was primarily a rural nature and did not include recourse to any intimate foray into the ‘wild’. However in making these comments it is important to identify that there remain exceptions to cultural patterns. One of these in the Romantic tradition was William Wordsworth who walked thousands of miles of the Lake District, this district being perhaps as loved and compelling for him as Yosemite was for John Muir. For further discussion of Wordsworth’s walks see, Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012).

³⁷ Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 49.

essential therefore that nature remain a “mere transparency.”³⁸ Nature worship, was hence, not strictly nature worship but meant:

...the use of the natural world – free from human social enterprise – as a screen against which to project that sense of value which is also the sense of the self ... in such heightened moods, one became aware, it was thought, of the immanent in the natural world. One saw through the phenomenon of nature into the divine noumenon (or ultimate reality) that lay behind it. And at the same time one released the noumenal self from the bondage of the phenomenal self, the personality and the world of social roles.³⁹

What this reveals is a symmetry in the wilderness narrative. Like the medieval townspeople who held wilderness epistemologically and ethically at bay, and like the Enlightenment technicians for whom nature was an eminently knowable object (while the citizen self in the process, likewise became, less the knowing subject and more the known object), the Romantics, in positioning the self as the ethical and epistemological centre, maintained an ethical distance from the wild. Becoming a part of the wilderness, or indeed the ‘wild’, was, for them, no less a resisted state.

The lack of intimacy and relationship the Romantics had with these wild places from which they were, by and large, geo-physically and epistemologically separated, is also made apparent by the Romantic’s celebration of the ‘solitude’ wilderness affords. That the Romantics saw wilderness as a place where one can be alone and find peace, is further evidence of the extent to which nature was not seen as kin, in the way it was for Gilbert White and most Indigenous cultures, for whom forested, desert and humanly sparse places are not places to be by oneself, in silence, but are rather convivial hubs, replete with fellow other-than-human companions. Such cultures sit within and not against those places we name as wild. The Romantics sense of the wilderness as strange and mysterious thus reveals the disconnect between the Romantics and the creatures and critters that dwelt in these ‘wild’ spaces and indicates to what extent company and kin were considered in only human, and culturally specific, terms. Analogously, the assumption by North American settler populations that the Native American Indians did not appreciate the ‘solitude’ wilderness provides,⁴⁰ reinforces the fact that here was an immense cultural gulf and a fundamental lack of understanding, not only of these places, but also of the people who called such places home.

³⁸ Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism*, 48.

³⁹ Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism*, 48.

⁴⁰ Peckham, *The Triumph of Romanticism*.

Neither is it surprising therefore that a distinctive feature of the burgeoning Romantic Movement is the fact that it was not a grass-roots or working class movement but one that belonged first and foremost to the literati, a group of people who did not have to wield either sword, axe or apron to eke out a living. Nor were such folk living proximate to, or at all dependant on, the unknown place(s) travelling under the sobriquet of 'wilderness.' The wilderness was, in this respect, not a 'force' or a 'threat' to conquer or manage, rather, it was primarily a compelling and mystical idea. What the Romantic sentiment expressed was an educated and emotional response to the ills of industrialisation and the consequent search for an ethical, spiritual and aesthetic alternative. It became, Nash suggests, a genteel pursuit, a sign of refinement, sensitivity and class, born not from prolonged experience of, or immersion in, 'N'ature but from a prolonged and distressing experience of urban life and urban values.⁴¹ Similarly, Cranston notes, that Rousseau did not himself see the wild as a place of refuge to turn to and be amongst in any continuous sense, rather he considered that the only real reprieve from modernity was to be found by "escape into villages and country places which had not been corrupted by the industries and luxuries and cultural institutions of cities."⁴²

The centrality of urban experience to patterns of knowing and being has continued, and now largely defines the late-modern environmental movement.⁴³ In this regard, the preservation of 'wilderness,' even where successful (and this is rare), does not change relationship to place. The wilderness continues to function culturally as a place to be admired and preserved, for aesthetic, spiritual and ethical reasons that variously reside in individual hearts.

Conclusion

While not wanting to underestimate the way in which the depth of Romantic feeling, intuition and imagination reignited a core and culturally neglected tenet of human being and while not wanting to negate some of the positive social and ecological consequences

⁴¹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 44-67. This is not small, local, known nature but nature with a capital 'N', nature as other.

⁴² Cranston, *The Romantic Movement*, 17.

⁴³ There are some notable exceptions, such as the protest group *Sea Shepherd* whose primary existence is spent in the 'wild' and whose protest is waged in this same terrain.

following from the mything of the wilderness, what needs to be remembered is that the Romantic's ideation of the wild is married to the idea of, and preoccupation with, the self. It is not then, one which can move us towards a different relationship with the other-than-human world, rather it reinforces in many important respects, the existing relationship. The wilderness that we may visit and love is, as a landscape, real and complex, yet the idea that circumscribes it will always threaten such places or indeed mark such places as threatening. As Cronon observes, wilderness has always been part of a dualistic vision where the human is not within but outside of/separate from nature. Therefore:

...to the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilisation, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honourable*, human place in nature might actually look like.⁴⁴

The false move for the Romantics and for later environmentalists who adopt their epistemology comes in assuming that where epistemological and geo-physical distance predominate, ethical relationship and change are still available. Throughout the rise of western culture the place(s) named as the wilderness, and the wild, have not been encountered on their own terms but have been subject to a mythology that has variously revered or denounced them. As such, the historical narrative of wilderness provides another window into the ontology that drives our cultural project - that to be human is to be, not, of this earth. Further to be human is to *know* this distinction, and in such knowing realise ones human being. In this regard, the 'new' idea of the wild, that post-White animated the Romantic Movement, was no different to earlier ideas and the relationships they suggested. Indeed the Romantic's invocation of the wild reinforced earlier ideology with the Romantics resting under this ontological umbrella, seeking in its shade, knowledge of the self.

Unsurprisingly then, the late modern rendering of the wilderness, following the old, fails to apprehend the subjectival presence of place, and moves us not towards but away from nuanced, flawed, complex relationship. What is most apparent, in the mapping of the wilderness, is that whether it is from a theologically imbued aversion or a romantic self-oriented reverence, what our relationship to the wild reveals is our relationship to the earth. The damaged and distorted nature of this relationship now threatens and

⁴⁴ Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, 81.

violates the integrity, diversity and beauty of the other-than-human world and the earth itself, that place we will not call home.

Unfortunately, the environment movement that attempts to mitigate and stem such destruction, is itself born from the epistemological framework premised on human/earth separation. Mistaken assumptions surrounding ideas of progress, and mistaken understandings of the present, due to a constantly shifting baseline, cloud our ability to see that cultural change within the given epistemological paradigms is not a viable proposition. The next chapter will examine the conservation era and subsequent iterations of the environmental movement from a place-based perspective and will argue that the limitations and capacities of such movements are determined by the potential for ecological consciousness within the culture, which itself depends on the capacity for subjectival, relational knowing.

The Terns' Tale

A lady comes to my door to tell me about everlasting life. I am studying, I tell her, this is not the time to dwell on everlasting life. This is not, my story.

I do not belong in the tale of Jehovah.

A woman in a pub starts rehearsing the plight of being single, Mum, going to uni, seven years, do I know how hard that is? I shake my head at my version of ingratitude. I switch off my attention.

My story is not there.

We sit, a circle of loved ones. A family. A new marina. Drinking coffee, eating fries, fish. The view entrancing, deep blue wet, lapping, rhythmic, encompassing each perceptive moment.

Fairy terns. My mother remarks. This used to be their nesting site, they flew all the way from the Arctic, and nested, and rested, here.

Where? I ask, right, here? Where we are drinking coffee on plastic chairs? She turns to my father, yep, he nods, just here.

And I remember, back. Two years ago, walking with my father and mother along what was then sand, the deep blue lapping against its shore, salt, seagulls and terns composing with the air. "Watch where you're going!" my dad yells at the bmx bikers carelessly skidding near the nests.

My dad crouches down checking that the nests are okay, "You'll be right, little battlers."

We watch, our family, the family of terns, feathers-full, nestling, caressing, preening.

Now we sit, on plastic, no terns, no nests, no homing.

I feel sick as the coffee slides down my throat.

This is my story.

Chapter Three

From Conservation to Deep Ecology

This chapter examines the conservation movement and what is commonly seen as its successor, the environmental movement, in their historical relationship to place. I propose that such relationship is informed by, the epistemological, ethical and ecological conditions that precipitate it and in turn emerge from it. My central contention is that the attempts at cultural change made by conservationists and environmentalists were – and remain – deeply informed and determined by their level of intimacy with and subjectival knowing of place.

I have argued that our cultural pattern of being human assumes and fosters the separation of the human from the other-than-human world. This has, as time passes, and place recedes from cultural view, resulted in the exponential destruction of place. If ecological consciousness depends on and develops from relationship with intact and diverse places, the continuing destruction of place means the continual diminishment of ecological consciousness. With a diminishing ecological consciousness the potential to transform our cultural relationship to place is likewise diminished. From this perspective, I suggest a vital difference between the conservationists and the environmentalists: namely, that despite the apparent stock of ‘eco-knowledge’ in late modernity, the early conservationists were more ecologically conscious than subsequent environmentalists. This is, I suggest, due to their connectedness to and relationship with place. Drawing on the research of Richard W. Judd (2009), I will consider the extent to which the conservationist’s lineage is traceable to the early naturalists of continental Europe and settler America, due to the conservationists’ physical intimacy and relationship with the land they were protecting. In this respect I also argue that the conservationists belong to a different tradition than the latter day environmentalists, whose heritage fits more closely with the Romantic sense of nature and the self.

This distinction indicates a bifurcation in the history of ideas, and challenges the widely accepted notion of an unfolding social progress and an ever expanding ethical compass. Key to the notion of progress is the belief in the historically continuous advance of consciousness, blossoming in the enlightenment worldview, finding social form in the revolution and rights discourse of eighteenth century Europe, and proceeding onward to produce multiple expressions of civil liberties including the conservation era and the subsequent swell of social and environmental protest that characterised the 1960s and beyond. In contrast, I propose that in important ecological respects there has not been a rise but a decline in consciousness and further there is no one single narrative, rather, two (or more) divergent paths exist. One fosters an ethical-epistemological, place-based holism. This, as symbolised by the character of Gilbert White, extends to the naturalist tradition and the subsequent conservation movement. The other follows the modalities of enlightenment science to produce the birth of the individual as socially defined and as excised from any *specific* place. Central to this tradition are the Romantics with their emphasis on the individual as an epistemological and ethical source and their emphasis on the natural world as fundamentally other. Following in their wake are the environmentalists who likewise look to the individual as the site of change and in so doing reinforce the enlightenment path, while by this time the ‘environment’ is, at the level of culture, excised from epistemological and ethical relationship.

The naturalist path, I will argue, is one that sustains a level of ecological consciousness. It does so by cultivating a Gilbert White form of knowing, one that is embedded in place and is subjectively and ethically informed. The second path, I suggest, undermines ecological consciousness by cultivating an epistemology that depends on the separation of person from place. This form of knowing cannot embed the self in place nor offer an alternative ethical relation to place at the level of culture. This is not however to suggest that the naturalist-conservationist tradition somehow ‘floats free’ from the ontological premises of its culture. Rather I am supposing that when these premises are situated in a more holist setting, they are circumscribed by affiliation and intimacy with the other-than-human world and are to this extent modified by such an affiliation. In such a context the error of the false ontology, premised on separation, is less likely to dominate and the pursuit of ways of knowing that reinforce such error are also less likely. In this setting, the risk of further ecological, epistemological and ethical distortion is reduced and place-based subjectivity has the opportunity to persist as a fertile, relational state. By contrast, where the notion of separation is reinforced, where place becomes geo-

physically and epistemologically remote from and peripheral to human experience, epistemological, ecological and ethical malformations can multiply. In such a setting place-based subjectivity diminishes as a viable condition.¹

In ignoring place as a person-shaping modality, while at the same time failing to theorise the site of the self as a culturally crafted phenomena, much environmental theory and protest tends to reinforce our faulty cultural model, despite tremendous efforts to the contrary. Since environmental theory and protest offer the most consistent and vital cultural attempts to confront ecological destruction, their impotence in addressing patterns of being and knowing is particularly alarming. At the same time, this failure can offer deep insight into the elemental mistake of our culture and the way in which this mistake has been perpetuated over time. With such awareness we can more readily see how, through such perpetuity, this error has become engrained in both our physical and psychological spaces.

In observing the limits of environmental theory and practice, I do not underestimate the passion, persistence and self-sacrifice of many environmentalists. Indeed this kind of activism was a role that I was deeply committed to for many years, and in a much more limited and indeed in a contradictory fashion, continue to be. What I want to stress is that the limitations of the environmental movement reside in its contingent but deeply embedded historical predicament. The paradox with which environmentalists are confronted is that the culture of protest whereby they voice their dissent is situated in an epistemological framework that alienates place from the human experience and alienates any one self from other selves. Yet to stand outside this (invisible) framework is to stand outside the 'culture' of protest and to stand outside this culture is to no longer be an environmental campaigner. What is needed, is a different epistemology, and this has not to date been available to the protest movement, or to our culture at large.

In the latter part of this chapter I examine what is perhaps the most probing attempt to forge both a different epistemology and a reconfiguration of the cultural relationship to

¹ My point here is that without ecological consciousness it is difficult if not impossible to care for and about place and its creatures. However ecological consciousness, as I am so describing it, does not necessarily imply ecological care, (even though the two usually coincide). A hostile relationship remains a relationship, albeit not usually a deep and intimate one – and where intimacy is lacking so too I suggest is consciousness. To the extent that the wild was morally repugnant to many early settlers indicates that some kind of relationship still existed. To the contrary the loss of relationship as evidenced in late modernity means that these spaces become objects – of analysis, research and discussion to be preserved or destroyed at will.

place and self. This is made by one of the more radical strands of the environmental movement known as ‘deep ecology.’ Deep ecology is unique in the way in which – unlike the vast amount of related literature – it pays close and specific attention to the cultural roots of ecological destruction. It examines the way in which our manner of thinking about the self and nature exist in direct relation to the ongoing and systematic degradation and destruction of nature, which in the process creates a limited and incomplete self. The movement thus differentiates itself from the ‘shallow’ address of the crisis as represented by those theorists who, while objecting to environmental destruction, seek to challenge the behaviour but not the values or the mindset of the culture where such behaviour resides.²

Notwithstanding the significance of this, I argue that deep ecology does not succeed in its attempts to foster an alternative way of knowing and being human, for it fails to address the extent to which cultural and geo-physical forms shape the potentiality for self (and social) transformation. Despite the fact that most individuals in late modernity live in contexts that deform and destroy the ecological integrity and stability of place, deep ecology continues to imagine the late modern self to be a discrete entity whose potential for change and ‘Self-realisation are unaffected by the widespread deformation and destruction of place. In this way it reinforces the very notion it seeks to challenge: namely, that the integrity of, and cultural relationship to, place does not affect the integrity of the self or the type of knowledge that is available to such a self. They are therefore committed to the premise that this self is sufficiently intact, even where and when place is damaged, this self, is then, in key respects fundamentally separate from place. Further, in perpetuating the belief that the individual self (as culturally defined) is the locus of cultural change, the movement ultimately leaves us to choose between the devil of dominant cultural paradigms and the deep blue sea of environmental discourses, neither of which proffer ontological, epistemological or ethical alternatives.

First however, to the perceived beginnings of the environmental movement, the conservationists and the historical (mis)perceptions of this movement that reveal accelerating shifts in the baseline of what it is to know, and to be in, place.

² For example, see Alan Drengson: “The short-term, shallow approach stops before the ultimate level of fundamental change, often promoting technological fixes (e.g. recycling, increased automotive efficiency, export-driven monocultural organic agriculture) based on the same consumption-oriented values and methods of the industrial economy.” Alan Drengson, *Foundations for Deep Ecology; “Some Thought on the Deep Ecology Movement,”* <http://www.deepecology.org/deepecology.htm> (last modified September 17, 2012).

Conservation and the Judgments of History

It has been variously argued that the goals of the conservationist movement were modest to a fault and its values closely aligned to those of mainstream, resource-driven culture. Under this line of interpretation, the movement aimed not for the preservation of forests, wetlands and prairies for their own sake but for the resource value they offered current and future human generations. According to Nash:

One of the most useful insights into recent American history concerns the qualitative difference between ‘environmentalism’ as it emerged in the 1960s and what used to be called ‘conservation’. When Gifford Pinchot named it in 1907 conservation stood squarely in the American mainstream...It stood for wise and efficient use of natural resources not the absence of use or the reinterpretation of nature as something other than a resource.³

Likewise Hays in, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, suggests that:

Conservation in its early stages was the handmaiden of economic development ... it was a movement of applied science not a democratic protest and its goal was the rational management of resources.⁴

These sentiments are reinforced by many of the more ‘radical’ modern environmentalists who argue for what are seen as the more far-reaching goals of reclamation (of degraded land) and preservation (of wilderness). Devall and Sessions, for instance, while identifying that John Muir, a key conservationist “cultivat[ed] his ecological consciousness through direct intuitive *experiencing* of nature” maintain that the conservation movement as a whole was primarily dictated by considerations of nature as a resource, worth preserving merely for current and future human enjoyment and use.⁵ Their critique of the conservation movement implies that the goals of the modern environmentalist are more challenging, exacting and morally potent than those of their early forebears. Such a critique also suggests that the values of modern environmentalists are sharply at odds with contemporary culture. At a yet more fundamental level, the implication is that culturally we have progressed and that our

³ Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 8-9.

⁴ Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2.

⁵ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith Publishing, 1985), 47.

ecological consciousness has advanced with the technological, scientific and economic ‘advances’ of our civilisation. Yet if we pause to reflect on the broader implications of such change it appears that these assumptions, in the face of accelerating ecological destruction and relatively muted protest to such destruction, are nothing if not peculiar. Already in 1952 Rauschenbusch was lamenting that:

Conservation is in danger of becoming a lost cause...the emotional content of these ideas survives mainly among the small farmers who love the land which gives them their living...But for most of the rest of the community, the two moving ideas of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and the host of great conservationists of the early part of the century seem to have lost attractiveness.⁶

While some fifty years later, the 2006 American Environmental Values Survey, indicates that:

Americans active support for environmental protection has been steadily eroding. Participation in Earth Day events in America is down from 20,000,000 people in 1970 to less than 1,000,000 today. And while 77% of Americans say they worry about the environment a great deal, or a fair amount, for most of them it is neither a personal nor a public policy priority.⁷

David Nicholson-Lord similarly argues that ecological concerns have faded from the public imagination and that instead we see an overall return to anthropocentrism with “human society turning in on itself and losing contact with nature.”⁸ Indeed Sessions himself comments that in 1992, 1575 of the world’s leading scientists from sixty nine different countries issued a collective warning to humanity, stating that “human beings and the natural world are on a collision course... [and that] a great change ... is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated.”⁹ Yet since that time no substantial change has been forthcoming. Instead “exponential global ecological deterioration ... has continued to occur since the Rio conference.”¹⁰ Given that destruction has not subsided but

⁶ Stephen Rauschenbusch, “Conservation is in Danger of Becoming a Lost Cause,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 281 (1952): 2.

⁷ ecoAmerica, *American Environmental Values Survey: American Views on the Environment in an Era of Polarization and Conflicting Priorities* (Washington DC: ecoAmerica, SRI Consulting – Business Intelligence, 2006), 3.

⁸ David Nicholson-Lord, “Blind Spot,” *Resurgence*, 237 (2006): 21-22.

⁹ UCS (Union of Concerned Scientists), quoted in George Sessions, “Wildness, Cyborgs, and Our Ecological Future: Reassessing the Deep Ecology Movement,” *Trumpeter* 22, no. 2 (2006): 128.

¹⁰ Sessions, “Wildness, Cyborgs, and Our Ecological Future,” 128-129.

continues to escalate it is unconvincing that ecological consciousness has, at the level of culture, increased. To the contrary, I suggest, it has waned and this is because the ongoing destruction of place is logically implicated in a diminishing relationship with place. From this perspective, I propose that the conservationists, who were more embedded in place, were both more conscious and more radical than earlier critics attest. Reassessing the conservation movement in the context of its times is one method of making visible shifts in the baseline and to draw attention to, the limitations of common analyses of the past and related diagnoses of the present.

The Origins of the Conservation Movement

Chronologically the conservation movement is defined, in the literature and in the public imagination, as the origin of the modern day environmental movement. It covers a period of protest in late settler America, spanning approximately forty to fifty years, from the end of the nineteenth century until the late 1930s. Characterised by the concerted attempt of a small group of individuals to stem, halt or mitigate what was promising to be the wholesale destruction of America's wild places, its key figures include John Muir (1838-1914), Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919), Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946), Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), John Burroughs (1837-1921), George Perkins Marsh (1801-1882), Stephen Mather (1867-1930) and William E Colby (1875-1964), amidst a host of local characters. However, Madelyn Holmes also draws attention to the fact, that the movement included many women who, while participating in and helping to define the movement, are often historically overlooked. These include (but are not limited to); the naturalist/ ornithologist Susan Fenimore Cooper (1813-1894) who wrote at length about local bird species. Their decline, she observed, was due to the destruction of the forests for railways and the culling of small birds for women's hats;¹¹ Mary Treat (1830-1923) who wrote about insects and spiders;¹² Katherine Dooris Sharp (1846-1935) a botanist and keen conservation activist, who proposed that, "a tract of land be protected in every neighbourhood";¹³ Olive Thorne Miller (1831-1918), a nature lover, bird specialist and author of children's books, who advocated for the love and

¹¹ Madelyn Holmes, *American Women Conservationists: Twelve Profiles* (London: Mc Farland and Company, 2004), 7-8.

¹² Holmes, *American Women Conservationists*, 9.

¹³ Holmes, *American Women Conservationists*, 9.

protection of nature;¹⁴ and Mary Austin (1868-1934) who rallied for the central Californian desert landscape, and wrote the influential text, *The Land of Little Rain*.¹⁵

All these figures were seminal in defining the values and goals of the movement. They were also vital in the realisation of its goals, key to which was the creation of, “the world’s first national parks, its first public game refuges [and] its first national forests.”¹⁶

As the environmental historian, John R. McNeill, observes:

Small nature conservation societies arose almost everywhere in the western world by 1910. Nature preserves and national parks, more or less isolated from economic use, emerged after 1870, first in Australia and North America, where after the near elimination of Aboriginal and Amerindian peoples, there was plenty of open space.¹⁷

The fundamental purpose of these national parks, as stated by the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, was to:

Conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wildlife therein, and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.¹⁸

In responding to the threats of clear-felling and the destruction of wildlife habitat, conservationists helped to found the New Hampshire Forestry Commission in 1881, the Society for the Protection of the New Hampshire Forests in 1901, and the White Mountain National Forest in 1911.¹⁹ One of the best-known ventures in conservation history was the establishment and protection of Yosemite National Park in 1890. The 1200 square mile expanse of this park was advocated for by the Sierra Club,²⁰ a group of

¹⁴ Holmes, *American Women Conservationists*, 9.

¹⁵ Holmes, *American Women Conservationists*, 17.

¹⁶ Thomas D. Visser, “Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England by Richard W. Judd,” *The New England Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (1998): 317.

¹⁷ John R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century World* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 337.

¹⁸ Sierra Club, *Sierra Club. “Policies: Conservation Policies,”* <http://www.sierraclub.org/policy> (last modified January 29, 2015).

¹⁹ Visser, “Common Lands, Common People,” 317.

²⁰ The Sierra Club’s mission as stated in their policy is to “To explore, enjoy, and protect the wild places of the earth; To practice and promote the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources; To educate and enlist humanity to protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment; and to use all lawful means to carry out these objectives.” Sierra Club, “Policies: Conservation Policies,” <http://www.sierraclub.org/policy/>.

passionate individuals who named their collective after California's Sierra Nevada mountain range.

While national parks and reserves are now an accepted part of our cultural and geographical landscape, it is worth remembering that such mappings are historically quite a recent phenomenon and a concerted response to the destruction of 'wild' nature. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, America, with its ample 'resource' pool and significant developments in technology and engineering, held out the promise for wealth, prosperity and an improved New England. To suggest a halt to or curbing of such 'progress', was at this time, to make a clear and definite counter statement. Gifford Pinchot, a Governor and one of the original conservationists recalls the origins of the thinking and practices that gave birth to the movement as an idea:

...so new that it did not even have a name. Our little inside group discussed it a great deal. Finally Overton Price suggested that we should call it Conservation ... so we called it the Conservation Movement.²¹

The novelty Pinchot is here referring to is the sense in which his, 'little inside group', shared a goal and vision that stood against the broader goals and values of the time. To consider this we need to look at the nature of 'nature' in early settler America and the broad cultural response to such places.

A distinguishing mark of the conservationist's story is that the land, for which the conservationists were seeking protection, was not a semi-rural idyll, but was proximate and formidable in a way that nature was not for Gilbert White, or for the Romantics in their rural and urban enclaves. Nor does the relationship the conservationist's had with these places, bear any real resemblance to the (lack of) relationship most campaigners have today, with the distant wild that, at best, fringes the geography and lives of today's heavily urban population. The distinction of this late nineteenth century American wilderness lay not only in its vastness and proximity to human life but also in the fact that it was, for most people, not a safe place. Dissimilar to the long hunted-out English woods, this was a setting where 'man' could, become prey. Wolves, tigers, bears and vipers all formed part of the American wilderness. This makes the relationship the conservationists bore to this space even more surprising, compelling and unique. Added to this was the fact that in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century American

²¹ J. Leonard Bates, "Fulfilling American Democracy: The Conservation Movement, 1907 to 1921," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (1957): 30-31.

life, the wilderness, while retreating under the colonialist's assault, was still both a geographically *and* mythically powerful place. The proximity and power of its – voraciously hunted and ravaged – wild creatures and the mythology that attended the idea of the wild meant for most the summoning of a certain kind of horror. To 'defend' this space against human attack was to reverse the moral logic of the society, where the human in both a moral and physical sense, was to be defended against the wild. Those who thought otherwise, were taking a radical stance for the time.

That the great majority of the settler population thought of the wild as a Godless and amoral terrain, is demonstrated by historical translations of prevailing attitudes and too by the destruction of these places. Muir reports that William Bradford, in observing the American landscape in 1620 from the deck of the Mayflower, saw, "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts and wilde men."²² Similarly, Judd alludes to the 'philosophical distaste for wild nature' characterising the times, with French Naturalist Comte de Buffon, one of the most influential naturalists of the eighteenth century, characterising it as a "nightmarish repetition of aimless growth and decay that without human intervention, was barren of purpose ... filled with old trees, loaded with parasitic plants, lichens, fungi, the impure fruits of corruption."²³ Scheuering comments that because of such attitudes "even when the trees were not needed for building houses or for heat, settlers cut them down, believing they needed to let redemptive air and light into the musty gloom."²⁴ In his description of the Salem witch trials, of 1693 Arthur Miller suggests that the "the Salem folk believed that the virgin forest was the devil's last preserve... to the best of their knowledge the American forest was the last place on earth that was not paying homage to God."²⁵ This orientation continued over the ensuing centuries, where the domination, suppression and conquering of this landscape was key to cultural developments. Nash quotes a correspondent to the *Saturday Evening Post*, as 'late' as 1965 forewarning that Wilderness was:

²² John Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 27.

²³ Richard W. Judd, *Common Lands, Common People: The Origins of Conservation in Northern New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10.

²⁴ Rachel White Scheuering, *Shapers of the Great Debate on Conservation: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), xvi.

²⁵ Arthur Miller, quoted in Jay Griffiths, *Wild: An Elemental Journey* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 60.

...precisely what man has been fighting against since he began his painful, awkward climb to civilization. It is the dark, the formless, the terrible, the old chaos which our fathers pushed back ... It is held at bay by constant vigilance, and when the vigilance slackens it swoops down for melodramatic revenge.²⁶

As discussed in Chapter Two, the idea of the wilderness does not exist in isolation but has its counterpart in the Garden. The idea of the wilderness is everything that is outside the garden, geographically, morally and spiritually. It is the unknown and unknowable 'other' that threatens human 'being.' In contrast, as Worster points out, Americans believed that their land of plenty, full of 'timber', 'game' and 'acreage', to be felled, culled and farmed, was abundant not by sheer chance but because it was the restored Garden of Eden, a land bestowed on them by Divine Providence.²⁷ Accordingly, and consistent with the purity of Eden, the Americans perceived themselves as a fundamentally innocent and good people, who were appropriately placed in this new world order.²⁸ Such a perception did not advocate the checking of colonial appetites but sanctioned the rampant culling of wild creatures. This is evidenced in the relative splendour of 1830s America, where:

Forty million Bison roamed the continent ... forty million white tailed deer, before there were farms and guns ... there may have been five billion prairie dogs ... as many as three to five billion passenger pigeons, migrating in dark, torn clouds that blotted out the sun ... navigations encountered off Newfoundland schools of fish so dense they blocked their passage, holding them prisoner, and waterfowl so thick they could feast forever on wild duck eggs.²⁹

Compare this to a century later, where, as Beatty observes, there is the loss of several important species including:

...the buffalo, the passenger pigeon, the heath hen, the condor and the whooping crane... in wildlife conservation there are many current predictions that wildlife is on the way out and that the end of public fishing and hunting in this country is near at hand.³⁰

²⁶ *Saturday Evening Post*, cited in Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 27.

²⁷ Bear in mind this 'garden' is not full of wolves, bears and forests but it is the wild, converted and controlled into 'game', 'timber' and 'acreage.'

²⁸ See Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9-15.

²⁹ Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, 4.

³⁰ Robert O. Beatty, "The Conservation Movement," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 281 (1952): 16.

These sobering details only document the loss of a few of the more conspicuous species, those that are perceived as an unnecessary or regretful loss. The menacingly wild creatures that were seen to, or did, threaten human life are remarkably absent from such accounts. The zeal and enthusiasm for hunting such creatures means that the Red Wolf no longer exists in the wild – only as a reintroduced species,³¹ while the Grey Wolf, which was once the ‘world’s most widely distributed mammal’, has become extinct in much of Western Europe, in Mexico and much of the USA.³²

This drive to eradicate wilderness and advance the garden that characterised settler America indicates that the conservationists in seeking protection of this wilderness not only stood outside their social norm, but on a deep level actively opposed it. Supporting this claim is the fact that their position was often met with outright hostility. Nicholas Roosevelt tells of how the conservation innovations that his uncle, the president, Theodore Roosevelt, tried to make, such as attempting to withdraw lands from being patented and ultimately exploited, were met with strong opposition from large swathes of the public as well as from industry:

It is difficult for Easterners to realise the depth of the antagonism of politicians, businessmen, ranchers, chambers of commerce and almost everyone living within easy reach of National forests or Parks, against the initial setting aside of these reserves and against all efforts to enlarge them and tighten the regulations governing their use.³³

Muir, Colby and others who opposed the damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley were likewise denounced as “mere visionaries and enemies of *progress*, which in the America of the early 1900s were words of scorn and contempt”³⁴ (italics added). Bates also observes the manner in which conservationists went against the colonial grain of the

³¹ “Very little is known about Red Wolf habitat because the species’ range was severely reduced by the time scientific investigations began ... The last naturally occurring population utilized the coastal prairie marshes of south-west Louisiana and south-east Texas (Carley 1975; Shaw 1975). However, many agree that this environment probably does not typify preferred Red Wolf habitat. ... Red Wolves are habitat generalists and can thrive in most settings where prey populations are adequate and persecution by humans is slight, [in areas of] low human density, wetland soil type, and distance from roads.” IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*; “*Canis Lupus*,” <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/3746/0> (last modified January 29, 2015).

³² IUCN, “*Canis Lupus*,” <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/3746/0>.

³³ Nicholas Roosevelt, *Conservation: Now or Never* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1970), 11.

³⁴ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 37.

time and despite being a diverse group of people were united by their “hatred of the boodler, the rank materialist, the exploiter.”³⁵ Part of the conservationist’s vision was a keen apprehension and appreciation of the beauty of the wilderness, which again most of the settler population failed to identify. As Madison observes, “Burroughs’s families, relatives and neighbours were as indifferent to Burroughs’s own writings as they were to the aesthetic pleasures of their region.”³⁶ Likewise Muir was one of the few people of his community who “looked on conservation as a practical way to preserve beauty – a concept which relatively few then grasped.”³⁷

In sum, the fact that the conservationists argued and rallied for place at a time when wild nature was seen as a physical and moral threat suggests that their stance was far less conservative than many modern writers suggest. In key respects, these writers and thinkers, naturalists, farmers, rambler, explorers, foresters and poets, were not reinforcing but opposing the colonial ethos. They were, arguably, writing in the midst of another baseline shift, which, while less significant than that which preceded the life of Gilbert White, nonetheless spoke to a model of person, place and community that was disappearing as fast as the Appalachian forests.

Knowing in Place

The charge of conservatism made against the conservationists, implying that they were reinforcing and reproducing the dominant culture, one in which nature was little but a resource to be used and exploited, becomes even less convincing when one considers the conservationist’s depth of relation with the places they were seeking to protect. This is revealed both in accounts of their lifestyles and in their own writing.

Unlike the earlier Romantics and unlike most urban dwelling environmentalists, and in spite of the threat the American wilderness posed, the conservationists in the Gilbert White model shared an intimate and often daily alliance with the places they attempted

³⁵ Bates, “Fulfilling American Democracy,” 38.

³⁶ Mark G. Madison, “Green Fields: The Agrarian Conservation Movement in America, 1890-1990,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995), 21.

³⁷ Madison, “Green Fields: The Agrarian Conservation Movement in America, 1890-1990,” 28.

to conserve. As detailed by Judd, Worster, Beatty and Roosevelt,³⁸ this relationship was evidenced by the explorer with a zest for the scale and the scope of the land; the naturalist who found delight, pleasure and intrigue in nature's particular details; botanists and ornithologists in love with their subject of study, and wanderers, dreamers and poets who made use of their rambles to sing about the beauty and majesty of the natural world:

If you scratch a conservationist you are likely to find a crusader under the skin. Among conservationists are artists and dreamers and hardy hikers and mountaineers: passionate protectors of wildlife: men and women who love natural beauty.³⁹

For this reason, the earlier naturalists, explorers and hikers, and most of the key conservation figures of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, were reputed as much for their rural know-how and forays in the wilderness as they were for their political actions. Nicholas Roosevelt recalled his uncle fellow conservationist and President Theodore Roosevelt speaking of Pinchot as a “great outdoors man, hardy, tireless and fearless.”⁴⁰ Mather was known as ‘an indefatigable hiker, mountain climber and camper,’ with his interest in preserving the West for purposes of hiking, camping, sight-seeing, being a “natural outgrowth of having done much tramping not only in the California Sierra but through most of the National Parks already in existence in the early 1900s.”⁴¹ Likewise Yosemite's key protector, John Muir's legendary love of the American wilderness and Yosemite came from him having “tramped over every trail – and off many of them – in the Sierra from south to north.”⁴²

Indeed Muir lived in Yosemite for up to eight years in a log cabin he built by the Yosemite Falls trail. Joseph LeConte, a fellow conservationist and friend, described Muir as:

... a most passionate lover of nature. Plants and flowers and forests and skies and mountains seem actually to haunt his imagination... [as he gazed he] meticulously recorded details – the effect of winds on waterfalls, the melting of snow on

³⁸ Richard W. Judd, *The Untilled Garden: Natural History and the Spirit of Conservation in America*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1977), Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*. Roosevelt, *Conservation*.

³⁹ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 5.

⁴⁰ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 15.

⁴¹ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 23.

⁴² Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 26.

evergreens, the sudden appearance and evaporation of clouds, and countless interrelationships of a kind usually overlooked by specialists.⁴³

Muir's writings communicated his love for, and knowledge of, this land and inspired similar feelings in his audience. As one commentator puts it, "his readers, whether they be presidents, congressmen, or plain folks, were inspired and often moved to action by the enthusiasm of Muir's own unbounded love of nature."⁴⁴ Muir revisited Yosemite for his entire life, as it always remained dear and deep to his heart and to his political compass. At the same time he also played a significant role in the creation of the Sequoia, Mount Rainier, Petrified Forest and Grand Canyon, national parks.⁴⁵ The year after Yosemite suffered the loss of Hetch Hetchy Valley to a hydro-electric project, a project that divided Pinchot and Muir henceforth, Muir himself lost his life to pneumonia.

This level of intimacy and personal connection of the conservationists with the places they were protecting was also facilitated through the non-motorized mode of travel by which conservationists, explorers and naturalists traversed the length of their landscapes, deploying the slow and tactile mediums of "foot, horseback or canoe."⁴⁶ The proximity to place that such modes entail suggests a level of observation that was not only a matter of choice but also matter of survival.⁴⁷ Like the Indigenous people of the land, attention was mandatory and as usually happens, where attention is given, affection and intrigue spring. This intimacy and subjectival knowing is reflected in the depth and detail of the conservationist's language, which like Indigenous modes of expression, does not speak of the world as a sterile, unanimated and remote object separate from one's own experience. To the contrary, such language reveals and gives expression to one's connection with the creatures and places in which one is immersed.

⁴³ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 27.

⁴⁴ Roosevelt, *Conservation*, 27.

⁴⁵ Sierra Club, *Sierra Club*. "John Muir: A Brief Biography," http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx (last modified April 29, 2013).

⁴⁶ Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 309.

⁴⁷ The recognition that walking the land changes the way we relate to it, is explored by a number of writers. Two of the more recent theorists examining this relationship are Robert Macfarlane and Jules Pretty. Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*. Jules Pretty, *This Luminous Coast: Walking England's Eastern Edge* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

Muir published up to three hundred articles and ten major books that described his travels, explicated his naturalist philosophy, and in which he beckoned everyone to “climb the mountains and get their good tidings.”⁴⁸ In such writing is found his love and understanding of the places and creatures so dear to his heart. Speaking here of his feathered friends he writes that:

Of all the great singers that sweeten Wisconsin one of the best known and best loved is the brown thrush or thrasher, strong and able without being familiar, and easily seen and heard. Rosy purple evenings after thundershowers are the favourite song-times, when the winds have died away and the steaming ground and the leaves and flowers fill the air with fragrance. Then the male makes haste to the topmost spray of an oak tree and sings loud and clear with delightful enthusiasm until sundown ... and how faithful and watchful and daring he is!⁴⁹

In a similar tone and with the same reverence for the land she inhabits, Florence Bailey, tells of a poignant and finally disturbing scene:

Coming down into the forest primeval, where the majestic hemlocks towered straight toward the sky ... there we found the blue jays in their home. A flock of them lived together, feeding on wild berries and beechnuts, sporting among the ferns and mosses and drinking from the brook that babbled along near the trail ... But the memory of the spot is dreary. Unmoved by the beauty of the scene, to which the blue jays gave color and life; unawed by the benediction of the hemlocks; betraying the trust of the friendly birds, the boy of the party crept into their very home and shot down one after another of the family as they stood resistless before him. Today the pitiful lament of the brave old birds haunts me.⁵⁰

These narratives tell not of epistemological or ethical distance but speak of a depth of knowing and feeling born out of intimate relationship. Such relationship did not arise in dreams of escape from a sordid urban reality, as characterised the Romantics, nor from abstract systems of classification and the objective analysis of the natural world, which identifies late ecological knowledge. Rather, the conservationists' was a subjective knowing that emerged through intimacy, observation, kinship and love of a dramatic, commanding and sometimes foreboding land. It was this embodied and embedded knowing that prefaced their will to conserve. In these key respects the conservation movement emerged from, a land ethic that existed *between* place and person and did not exist in person alone.

⁴⁸ Sierra Club, “John Muir,” http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/life/muir_biography.aspx.

⁴⁹ Muir, *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, 113.

⁵⁰ Florence Bailey, quoted in Holmes, *American Women Conservationists*, 43.

Due to the conservationists' level of intimacy with, and knowledge of, the land as revealed in their writings, Judd argues that the conservation movement could not have emerged from the 'thin national tradition' captured by the lives of its few key figures alone.⁵¹ He suggests rather, that its roots lay in the more nuanced naturalist tradition that began some one to two hundred years earlier.⁵² From this perspective, the seeds of the conservation movement were sown in the thinking and practices of explorers and naturalists such as John James Audubon (1785-1851), Mark Catesby (1682-1749), Thomas Nuttall (1786-1859), Charles Lyell, (1797-1875), John Bartram (1699-1777), William Bartram (1739-1823) Benjamin Barton (1766-1815), Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809), and Constantine Rafinesque (1783-1840), among others.⁵³ According to Judd, these and the hundreds of like-minded characters who traipsed the American continent between the mid eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century, dedicated their lives to understanding nature and "commented on everything from antiquities to zoology, including ... the human condition in this wilderness."⁵⁴ These figures were key in the discovery of new species, in their observations of the local flora and fauna and their place in the natural order. In bearing witness to the rapid and often vast destruction and transformation of much of America's wilderness, their understanding of ecological connection was firsthand. Damage to one part of the system was visibly and immediately seen to affect another. From such understanding they promoted the idea that Americans were morally bound to preserve the health and stability of this ecological whole and the creatures for which it was home. In this sense, they can be seen to have cultivated the ecological understanding and appreciation to which later conservationists responded.

Like the conservationist's narratives, the naturalist's records, were full of life, colour and affection for the nature they observed. The travellers' descriptions embody a sense of camaraderie with their other-than-human kin, full of anecdotal observation and brimming with imagination, humour and wonder. Thus, for example, the esteemed ornithologist, John James Audubon provides an intricate account of birds:

⁵¹ Judd, *The Untilled Garden and Common Lands, Common People*.

⁵² Judd, *The Untilled Garden and Common Lands, Common People*.

⁵³ Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 6-7.

⁵⁴ Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 6.

But see, the tide is advancing; the billows chase each other towards the shores; the mullets, joyful and keen, leap along the surface, as they fill the bays with their multitudes. The slumbers of the Pelicans are over; the drowsy birds shake their heads, stretch open their mandibles and pouch by way of yawning, expand their ample wings, and simultaneously soar away. Look at them as they fly over the bay; listen to the sound of the splash they make as they drive their open bills . . . mark how they follow that shoal of porpoises, and snatch up the frightened fishes that strive to escape them.⁵⁵

Likewise, the nineteenth century Alabama naturalist Thomas Nuttall, describes the birds that:

...play around us like fairy spirits, elude approach in an element which defies our pursuit, soar out of sight in the yielding sky, journey over our heads in marshalled ranks, dart like meteors in the sunshine of summer, or, seeking the solitary recesses of the forest and the waters, they glide before us like beings of fancy ... How volatile, how playfully capricious, how musical and happy, are these roving sylphs of nature.⁵⁶

This level of imaginative intimacy is also revealed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries naturalist's and explorers' pictures, where the creatures being sketched, rather than being presented in structural and anatomical detail or static pose, are drawn as animate, often moving, paw raised, about to leap, fly, dive, perhaps catch an unwitting spectator.⁵⁷ This is the image of life – not death – as the intelligible condition.

It is important to remember that language consists of not simply a telling, a description of a static world, but that our very expression reveals a way of being in and of this world. The way one speaks to, of, and with, place indicates the kind of relationship one has – or fails to have – with place. As Cheney observes;

... language is a mode of interaction ... that affects the life and behaviour of all other animate forms...The mindfulness – or etiquette – we bring to our interaction with the world shapes our knowledge of that world.⁵⁸

In their ways of knowing and being in place is the fundamental synthesis between the naturalists and conservationists – one that sets them apart from the enlightenment and Romantic tradition that respectively objectifies and separates nature from human experience.

⁵⁵ Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 253.

⁵⁶ Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 252.

⁵⁷ See Judd, *The Untilled Garden*, 24, 108, 196.

⁵⁸ Jim Cheney, "The Journey Home," In *An Invitation to Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Weston, 141-167 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142.

Retrospect

The conservationists spoke out for, lived within and intimately knew the wild-erness at a time when nature was considerably more physically immediate and threatening than it is today. They also spoke for a land ethic⁵⁹ when the ethical was increasingly a matter of individualised convictions and when there was powerful social resistance to opposing the colonial norm. When the intersecting and shifting baselines of place, person and community are taken into account, the level of ecological consciousness the conservationists had compared to earlier romantics and later environmentalists, becomes apparent. But it is also clear that in the practice of defining and protecting the wild, the conservationists also unwittingly participated in the definition and protection of culture. This is particularly apparent in the national park model. In the cultural environment of settler America, wilderness could only be protected if kept at a safe distance from the garden. If the wild was removed from normal day-to-day human experience it could to some extent be normatively accepted. For the conservationists, such a remove was not the norm, these parks were known and loved places, yet for many of their own and subsequent generations they remained largely unknown, sparsely visited areas that stood outside of daily life and reinforced the nature/culture divide. As a park, the wild is not a free but a conditional space, the condition being paradoxically, that the wild is not too-wild, that it is in fact, contained. In this way the national park ideal was at its conceptual centre deeply flawed and yet at the same time it undeniably placed a check on the drive to be rid of wilderness altogether.⁶⁰

The ideology of the separation of the human from the other-than-human world has continued and it is this that has become the very premise of environmentalism. Environmentalism, as Anthony Weston suggests, delegates protection of the 'earth' to its human custodians, who remain safe and fit in an increasingly unsafe and unfit world.

⁵⁹ Aldo Leopold, in tracing his relationship with the land, coined the term land ethic, well before environmental ethics had come to the fore as a body of theory. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁶⁰ Under this park model if the geographical distance between the wild and the garden is transgressed, nature ceases to be a source of wonder and awe becoming instead a site of fear and a threat to be banished or killed. Currently this is disturbingly apparent in the policy to cull sharks that merely exist in their own habitat, in the panicked removal and/or destruction of urban dwelling snakes and in the northern hemisphere the eradication of bears or wolves who frequent rural areas, grazing as they will on livestock.

This is an inversion of the order of things, for in actuality it is “nature [that] conserves us, as the Naskapi Indians say, not we it.”⁶¹ Because of this inbuilt pull towards separation, when the wild became scientifically named, cordoned, distanced and thus diminished, the self-place relationship at the centre of the conservationists’ approach, collapsed.

Hence the twentieth century environmental movement began at a significant ecological, epistemological and ethical disadvantage. Its revolutionary hands, were, from the outset, tied. The space into which it was to fight for the ‘environment’ was a space already separate from human being, from the self, from self-knowing and from the ethical as a form of cultural transformation.

From Conservation of Place to Protection of the Environment

Between the decline of the conservation movement in the early 1930s to the rise of the environment movement in the early 1960s there was a period of relative quiet. This was not in terms of ecological destruction and consumer production, which continued unassailed, but in the volume of voices speaking out against such practices. Prior to the 1960s, according to McNeill, “no co-ordinated policies or political currents dealt with the environment as such” but this changed “as a direct result of the tumult in the world of ideas.”⁶² As a social phenomenon protest was exploding in the 1960’s. Here emerging environmental concern shared the protest arena with the fight for women’s rights, racial equality, and anti-war demonstrations. This period galvanised an increasingly vocal mix of philosophers, scientists, farmers, students, mothers, teachers, activists and members of the general public who started to think, and started to say, that something was wrong.

For many a turning point was the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. In this ground-breaking text, Carson documented the deadly effects of pesticide use on human and other-than-human communities. What galvanised public attention was not only the toxic effects of this ‘certified’ industry but also the fact that a scientist was speaking out against the establishment of which she was part. Under the power of her

⁶¹ Anthony Weston, *Back to Earth: Tomorrow’s Environmentalism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), 3.

⁶² McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 337.

dissident voice and her well-documented arguments, Carson collected a support base in the same manner that environmental organisations with their own anthems of dissent began to collect members.⁶³ From this time forth a wealth of national and international environmental organisations emerged. Some of the more prominent groups included societies such as Greenpeace, founded in Canada in 1971, The Wilderness Society, Earth First!, Friends of the Earth (the second chapter of The Sierra Club), Earth Watch, Worldwide Fund for Nature, World Conservation Union, Wetlands International and Sea Shepherd. Alongside these arose a multitude of local and regional forest, marine, estuarine, flora and fauna protection societies.

However, despite the calibre and force of these groups and their protests, these organisations were and have been for the last fifty years largely unsuccessful in challenging patterns of destruction. At each instance, when a local area is seemingly saved or a new environmental law is introduced, this apparent win is undercut by further and more wide reaching destruction, made 'feasible' by the allocation of a 'protected' area. An example of this is the 'win' by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society in 1984, to save Tasmania's last wild river from being dammed. At the time this might have seemed like a cultural turning point. But today, environmentalists are caught in tireless efforts to stop more and multiple destructions. In Tasmania alone, and to name but two recent incursions: the world heritage listed forests of the Florentine Valley are set to be logged by the Australian government and the fragile ecosystem of the Tarkine Wilderness is under threat from mining, while new legislation is being introduced that makes protest under certain conditions illegal.⁶⁴ The lack of success environmentalists experience is thus through no fault of their own or through lack of effort and concern but is due to the fact that the place from which they are speaking and the culture which they are addressing is one that is epistemologically and ethically separate from place. This is no more apparent than in the discourse of the environment. The environment,

⁶³ While making note of Carson's historical significance I do not intend to underestimate the struggle she went through with the pesticide industry. The challenges she was up against are narrated in her biography: Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997).

⁶⁴ "The Legislative Council has backed the Tasmanian Government's anti-protest laws, which allow for on-the-spot fines and three-month mandatory jail sentences for repeat offenders ..The laws are aimed at forestry protests but there were concerns it was a catch-all for other action ...On-the-spot fines for first-time offenders were dropped from \$2,000 to \$280 but the upper limit is still set at \$10,000 for repeat offenders." "Tasmania's Anti-Protest Laws Pass Upper House Hurdle," *ABC News*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-30/tasmania27s-anti-protest-laws-pass-upper-house-hurdle/5852722>.

as Anthony Weston relates, is not something that one is part of, belongs to, or craves but “supposes a point of reference, something or someone surrounded. And of course that point of reference is – us!”⁶⁵ The ‘us’ to which Weston refers is a self not in or of this environment but separate from it (and the earth), a spokesperson, an advocate, a supporter – barracking from the stands.

When place became the environment, usurping ecology in the same way that ecology had previously filled the space that oecumeny once inhabited, the ‘wild’ had long been a place that was not considered home (except by a few individuals) but this was not just a semantic exchange of terms. For what was reflected in this language was a change in relationship to these places at the level of culture. Discussion and analysis of the environment and environmental problems, is discussion and analysis of a place and a set of problems that are inherently abstract and separate from human life; it is a place that is not now and could never be, in this definition, home. Accordingly, in late modernity, the wilderness has been ideologically and geo-physically consigned to the periphery of civilisation and all but divested of its capacity to pose a moral or physical threat. In addition, widespread industrial and technological developments that keep the wilderness at a vast and ‘safe’ distance mean that subjective knowing of, and moral commitment to, wild places is less and less culturally possible. The wilderness is now defined as an object of scientific and legal discourse and dispensation – as, for example, “a place that is mostly biologically intact” and “a place that is legally protected so that it remains wild, and free of industrial infrastructure, and open to traditional indigenous use, or low impact recreation.”⁶⁶ The story of modern environmental protest is thus one that is speaking of a place that is not part of human experience or human identity as culturally prescribed. Compounding this is the fact that the protest culture is one that is also premised on separation. The very act of speaking out is to speak out as a self who has an individual right to his/her voice. One can speak thus as a black, as a woman, as a homosexual, a pacifist or as an advocate of the earth, the ‘cause’ being always subsidiary to the right to be heard. What then *collects* the disparate voices is that which, ironically, also divides them: their constitutionally distinct, individual right to speak. This

⁶⁵ Weston, *Back to Earth*, 6. This is also apparent in the way people speak of their ‘surroundings,’ the implication of which is that the centre-point, the point of knowledge and concern, is the human – self.

⁶⁶ The WILD Foundation, *The WILD Foundation: How We Work*. “What is a Wilderness Area,” <http://www.wild.org/main/how-wild-works/policy-research/what-is-a-wilderness-area/> (last modified May 1, 2013).

discursive stance divides them ethically not only from each other but also from that which they are speaking for.

Hence, fifty years after the environmental movement emerged, the multitude of once marginalised voices have found a place in the public text, where they now reflect widespread opinion. ‘Extinction’, ‘global warming’, ‘deforestation’, ‘oil spills’ ‘cultural decimation’ have become part of the collective vocabulary. Yet far from being galvanising concepts, these form the basis of everyday reporting. Indeed environmental discourse and what appears as environmental consciousness are seemingly commonplace. As Weston wryly observes:

We are all environmentalists now. Yet we stand at no less a distance from the more-than-human world: from “nature,” from other animals and natural places. We are no more inclined to acknowledge – certainly not really to *feel* – that we ourselves are at stake with “nature,” with the rest of the world: entwined, enveloped, submerged in it. Vanishing species, to take just one example, are only regretted in the way we might regret the loss of a television series ... we move ourselves outside the system entirely. We have been “dangerous” now we must “care.” We are still the chief actors in this play, only now we must take a bit more care for the scenery.⁶⁷

Under this scenario, ‘nature’ comprises the set of phenomena variously under threat – rivers, species, eco-systems and forests. Their ‘protection’ is seen to exist in the absence of a *particular* threat, whether this involves a cease-mining by Woodside, the ‘banning’ of certain practices, a long awaited moratorium on the logging of old growth forests, or a report outlining in scrupulous detail the impending consequences that will result in the ‘no-action’ option.⁶⁸ In these respects, the problem is not seen to lie in the fundamental western premises of what it is to be human, (and the ‘solution’ therefore is not in challenging these premises) but is read as a limited, finite, earth bearing the consequence of a late technological-industrial-consumerist lifestyle. This lifestyle however is not up for contestation.

⁶⁷ Weston, *Back to Earth*, 1-3. Analogously, even in the language of ‘saving the earth’, human separation is accentuated.

⁶⁸ One such is the seminal Club of Rome report whose scope and range attempts to account for, model and map the “limits to growth’ for the entire world system.” Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1980), 252. Obviously, since this time, damage and destruction has escalated as has the production of reports outlining this. One of the most well-known series of reports since the Club of Rome data, is the Climate Change reports produced by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). *IPCC; “Organization.”* Last modified January 29, 2015. <http://www.ipcc.ch/organization/organization.shtml>.

The mainstream response is thus to try to preserve iconic ‘wild’ places, rivers, forests, beaches, with their own set of mega fauna, dolphins, elephants, koalas, tigers, while at the same time catering to western lifestyle yearnings so that they may be met in finite, ostensibly sustainable, material ways. Herein the crisis is not only offered technological, scientific, organisational, administrative and economic solution, but the lifestyle suggested by such solutions is the same lifestyle the affluent West now experiences, only with green alternatives replacing less sustainable models. Where our ‘choices’ may formerly have been understood as part of an individual, consumer practise they can now be written into a collective green ‘conscience.’ Arguably, under the green model it is not the patterns of consumption and citizenship themselves that change, but the packaging of consumer and civic practice. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, these cultural solutions succeed only to perpetuate and reproduce both ecological and cultural pathology.

That the environmental movement was not relieving assault on the environment, which was continuing relatively unmediated, caught the attention of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1972. Together, with other concerned philosophers, Naess suggested that for any long-term transformational shift to occur, what we need to address is not just particular behaviours but our very relationship with the other-than-human world. He called this approach, deep ecology.

Deep Ecology

Deep ecology emerged from within the midst of the culture where environmental protest was most active, the northern lands of Europe and America. It was also theoretically embedded in a suite of discourse that voiced a wide range of ecological dissent and debate. Much of the debate was focused on the difference between shallow reform oriented approaches and deeper cultural reform, also, within the cultural reformation (and transformation) models debate raged around social, political and ecological alliances. Some of the key schools of thought that arose at this time did so, in response and reaction to the claims of deep ecology. These included, amidst other minor camps, social ecology,⁶⁹ political ecology,⁷⁰ spiritual ecology⁷¹ and eco-feminism.⁷²

⁶⁹ See Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Stirling, Scotland: AK Press 2004), Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Stirling, Scotland: AK Press, 2005).

All these, perhaps most notably eco-feminism, have made key contributions towards furthering our understanding of the logic of domination and power that systematically underlies individually mediated, yet ultimately collective, behavioural norms which lead to the incremental and relentless devastation of the planet.

What however distinguishes deep ecology from these schools is the manner in which it does not link this behaviour and its remediation to a political platform but to the experience of being human that is beyond questions of gender and questions of factional alliance. Its lens is focused on a metaphysical/ ontological examination of cultural practice not on a political or gendered examination of such practice. Whilst these alternative discourses provide valuable cultural commentary, in the specificity of their focus, this commentary remains limited in its capacity to redress the foundation of the crisis. Without considering, how, for example, patriarchy impacts on place, where place is an ecologically *and* culturally informed identity or how socialism frames and understands the self and how this understanding impairs relationship to place – or – how capitalism and the materialist imperative impact on the possibility for not only diverse political systems but for diverse mappings of the self, these theories, while valuable and powerful in their own terrain, remain in their efficacy confined to such terrain. Without this redress so much political, social and gender reform will remain palliative and fail to ultimately challenge and transform the cultural fabric and fail further to proffer insight into the way in which the threads of this fabric knit together.

The key theorists of deep ecology, Arne Naess, Bill Devall, George Sessions, Warwick Fox and Andrew Laughlin,⁷³ are thus singular in the way that they respond not only to

⁷⁰ See James O'Connor, Terry L. Anderson and Donald R. Leal, cited in Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, George Sessions, Karen J. Warren and John Clark, eds., *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

⁷¹ Henryk Skolimowski, *A Sacred Place to Dwell: Living with Reverence upon the Earth* (Rockport, MA: Element Books, 1993). For an interesting analysis on Christianity's role in shaping and mal-forming human relationship to the earth, see Lynn White Jr, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

⁷² See Freya Mathews, *The Ecological Self* (London: Routledge, 1991), Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: the Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), and Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

⁷³ There are of course others who may be more or less happy to be counted as deep ecologists, these include Joanna Macy, Jim Cheney, Stephan Harding, Patsy Hallen and John Seed to name

the threat of human devastation upon the planet but to materialist ‘solution’ to such devastation. Deep ecology asks and demands deeper questions and deeper responses to what it considers to be a complex predicament of historical, ecological and ontological proportions, “the essence of deep ecology is to keep asking more searching questions about life, society and Nature as in the western philosophical tradition of Socrates.”⁷⁴ Deep ecologists argue that it is through this questioning process that the central norm of deep ecology becomes intuitively apparent. This is the norm of ecological consciousness. From this norm derive the subsequent norms of ‘self-realisation’ and ‘biocentric equality’. While distinct, these three norms mutually inform each other. In deep ecology, to be realised as a self is to be conscious of the ultimate connectedness of the self with the wider ecological whole. The self if fully realised – in one of three possible interpretations⁷⁵ – is *indistinguishable* from the wider ecological whole. John Seed proposes that when this identification is present, “‘I am protecting the rainforest’ develops into ‘I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking ... the change is a spiritual one.’”⁷⁶

The realisation of the ecological self requires the relinquishing or repositioning of the egoistic self – becoming conscious of the breathing, biotic world as composite of and co-extensive with self. In self-realisation therefore is ecological consciousness, a consciousness of the connectedness and interconnectedness of all parts of the living cosmos. It is to know that if we poison and degrade the earth we poison and degrade

but a few of the more well-known writers and practitioners. This of course leaves glaringly absent the wealth of activists and campaigners who practise deep ecology and pursue its goals on a daily basis. For this reason I need to stress that the focus is here on the key theorists of this movement and the direction they offer in this theory.

⁷⁴ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 65.

⁷⁵ Warwick Fox documents the three kinds of self available to deep ecology theorists, these being, the indistinguishable self, the expanded self and the transpersonal self. Warwick Fox, *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology: Developing New Foundations for Environmentalism* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1990). I am only here focusing on the indistinguishable self – this is because it attempts the most direct relation to place and, as Plumwood observes, the transpersonal and extended self are heavily mired in respectively, the egoistic and rationalist models of the self, with the transpersonal self in seeking dis-attachment to the particular, reinforcing the universalizing, abstracting principles characteristic of rationalist accounts of the self, while the extended self in its taking into the self of the other denies and disrespects the difference of the other and to this extent further reinforces the presence and scope of the egoistic self. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 173-182.

⁷⁶ John Seed, *Thinking like a Mountain: Towards a Council of all Beings* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1988), 36.

ourselves. “The greater the comprehension of our togetherness with other beings, the greater identification and the greater care we will take.”⁷⁷

To the extent that this is not simply a consciousness of ecological destruction on its own terms but a consciousness of the way in which such destruction damages the possibility for being a fully realised self, self-realisation is intrinsically related to the second key deep ecology norm, biocentric equality. Biocentric equality is the intuition that all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and flourish – they have an equal right to self-realisation. The greater the self-realisation of all beings – the greater the ecological diversity – the greater the potential for self-realisation of all beings “self-realisation is the realisation of the potentialities of life ... the self-realisation we experience with the universe is heightened by the number of ways in which individuals, societies and even species and life forms realise themselves.”⁷⁸

Deep ecologists argue that in pursuing the norms of self-realisation, bio-centric equality and ecological consciousness, one is led to one’s own ultimate premises that in turn lead to one’s own Ecosophy. There is no need for agreement in ultimate premises, these can be found in sources as diverse as Buddhism, Christianity, Philosophy or any ‘intuitive’ foundation that seems compatible with deep ecological leanings.⁷⁹ For Naess his Ecosophy, grounded in place and philosophy was Ecosophy T – where T refers to Tvergastein. – the mountain hut in Norway where his thinking and being were most at home.⁸⁰

Aside from accessing one’s fundamental Ecosophy, through the deep questioning process, one must also, as a deep ecologist, accept something like the eight principles at the core of deep ecology that together form the deep ecology platform. The eight principles are a set of norms, beliefs, values, and implied actions that follow the form of a deductive argument with acceptance of the first five resulting in a commitment to six, seven and eight. They present not a definition of deep ecology but are intended to foster a collective allegiance to the ‘what is’ of what deep ecology represents. While they can

⁷⁷ Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 175.

⁷⁸ An interview with Arne Naess, quoted in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 76.

⁷⁹ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 79-108.

⁸⁰ Arne Naess, “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” 193-210, cited in Zimmerman, Callicott, Sessions, Warren and Clark, *Environmental Philosophy*, 207-210.

be interpreted according to one's own worldview they cannot, by those who accept deep ecology, be rejected. They are as follows:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes.⁸¹

Given that deep ecologists do not develop a theory *per se*, the eight point platform of deep ecology, alongside the cultivation of ecological consciousness and the related norms of self-realisation and biocentric equality, stand in for such. Deep ecologists also present as 'evidence' for their position a collage of thinkers from disparate discourses, who, in one way or another, seem to support deep cultural change. For this reason,

⁸¹ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 71.

somewhat ironically, what we find in the deep ecology literature is not depth but breadth, with the authors in question quoted widely in an ad-hoc, unsystematic way. This has led to much criticism, Marshall writes that “these fine ideals often remain vague slogans without substance in the writings of deep ecology,”⁸² with the qualifications issuing from biocentrism being ‘so ambiguous and vague that they are virtually meaningless.’⁸³ Likewise part of Sylvan’s critique is directed at the wide bow deep ecology draws and the way in which such imprecision creates ‘conceptual murkiness’ and ‘degeneracy.’⁸⁴

Against this, Sessions and Devall argue, that deep ecology is strengthened by the wide array of traditions that support it – these include but are not limited to indigenous philosophies, the science of ecology, the perennial philosophy, the new physics, the pastoralist/naturalist literary tradition, singular poets, essayists and philosophers, feminism, some eastern spiritual traditions and some Christian sources.⁸⁵ Accordingly, Naess boldly claims that, “the deep ecology movement tackles every major contemporary personal, economic, political, and philosophical problem.”⁸⁶

While the celebration of breadth does not necessarily counter critiques against deep ecology’s lack of depth and detail, part of the reason for this broad compass and lack of systemisation, is the reluctance on the part of deep ecologists to develop anything that may be interpreted first and foremost as an environmental ethic. What is at stake, they argue, and what is required, is a change that develops and persists at the more fundamental, *experiential*, level. Naess, Sessions, Devall and Fox all stress this distinction, arguing that, ‘the foundations of Deep Ecology are the basic intuitions and ‘experiencing’ of ourselves and Nature which comprise ecological consciousness.’⁸⁷

Likewise Naess writes:

I’m not much interested in ethics or morals. I’m interested in how we experience the world ... if deep ecology is deep it must relate to our fundamental beliefs, not

⁸² Peter Marshall, *Nature’s Web: An Exploration of Ecological Thinking* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 419.

⁸³ Marshall, *Nature’s Web*, 421.

⁸⁴ Sylvan, quoted in Warwick Fox, *Approaching Deep Ecology: A Response to Richard Sylvan’s Critique of Deep Ecology* (Hobart, TAS: Board of Environmental Studies, 1986), 2.

⁸⁵ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 80.

⁸⁶ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 32.

⁸⁷ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 65.

just to ethics. Ethics follow from how we experience the world. If you experience the world so and so then you don't kill.⁸⁸

This stress on the centrality of experience is tied into Naess' belief in the significance of gestalts, that is, the experience of the whole by which we interpret reality. More fundamentally for Naess, this experience of the whole always occurs at what he calls the apperceptive level – an apprehension at the level of perception that includes both sensory and normative elements. In this interpretation ethical distinctions and broad distinctions of fact and value operate at the level of abstraction which is outside apperception.⁸⁹ Naess argues that, for this reason, the world of apperceptive gestalt is the only world we can truly know and it is to this knowing that we need to orient ourselves in order to execute deep cultural change.⁹⁰

At first glance the deep ecologist's emphasis on experience as the tool of transformation seems to assist them in overcoming some of the limitations that beset environmental ethicists. As Plumwood suggests, the tendency for environmental ethics is, unsurprisingly, to see both the core problem and the core solution as an ethical one where the problem presents as the lack of ethical expansion – to include other species/ systems/ life-forms and the solution, unsurprisingly is to expand or develop ethics in a direction that includes alternative species/ systems/ life-forms. The task then becomes making sense of an ethical model that will do justice to the sort of environmental change that is required to both preserve and respect 'nature', however we understand this. However, Plumwood insightfully suggests, that not only is ethical solution fraught, but the emphasis on conventional ethics as the key problem is deeply misplaced:

Mainstream environmental philosophy is problematic not only just because of restriction in ethics but also because of restriction to ethics. Most mainstream philosophers continue to view environmental philosophy as primarily concerned with an extension of existing ethical frameworks ... but this neglects the key further aspects ... of dualism and the account of the self and of human identity as hyper-separated from nature, the connection between this and the instrumental view of nature, as well as the broader historical and political aspects of the critique of dualism and instrumentalism.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Naess, quoted in Fox, *Approaching Deep Ecology*, 46.

⁸⁹ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 60.

⁹⁰ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 57-63.

⁹¹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 173.

What she narrates as the more fundamental and systemic problem is the rationalist tradition with its accompanying dualist structures. While critiquing deep ecology for its reversion to such a tradition Plumwood concedes that deep ecology has had some success in broadening the scope of concern beyond mere ethics to include questions of the self (as indicated in the ‘experience’ of the self), self-identity and discontinuity from nature.⁹²

Nonetheless it is not entirely clear that deep ecology avoids recourse to mainstream ethics altogether, invoking as it does, rights theory and general prescriptive positions both in its eight point platform and its norm of biospherical egalitarianism. Indeed one of the key critiques launched at deep ecology by Sylvan is that deep ecology, rather than having an experiential core, has a normative, value-prescriptive core.⁹³ In response, Naess argues that he employs rights discourse since it is the “best expression I have found so far of an intuition I am unable to reject in all seriousness.”⁹⁴ Likewise Sessions suggests that Naess, in citing the ‘equal right of all things to live and blossom’, is not suggesting a rights theory but is using the word ‘right’ in an everyday or metaphorical sense.⁹⁵ However the difficulty Naess and Sessions face is that it is not the more careful philosophical sense but the ‘everyday’ sense that is precisely the problem, and precisely that which gives rise to the ‘intuition’ that rights are the appropriate means for changing relationship to the other-than-human world. The everyday thinking and rhetoric that surround discussions of rights tend to not focus on the individualistic, neo-liberal legacy from which rights are spawned. Rather, the emphasis is on how and where and for whom or what these rights should function. In this respect rights tend to be understood as a pre-given social and political reality that bear a certain obviousness to the modern citizen, one that makes ‘intuitive’ sense. This is acceptable of course, to the extent that one is not trying to transform current modes of thinking and being. If however, one is hoping to do this, as are the deep ecologists, then the invocation of rights discourse becomes problematic. For as even a cursory historical analysis reveals, rights, rather than being obvious or intuitive, are a discrete cultural product that are inseparable from the

⁹² However I do not consider this to be sufficient, for the ontological error cannot be redressed through eradication, even if possible, of rationalist frameworks. Even without these frameworks and accompanying dualist structures, the error still persists.

⁹³ Sylvan, quoted in Fox, *Approaching Deep Ecology*, 29-30.

⁹⁴ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 167.

⁹⁵ Fox, *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology*, 39.

idea and identity of the individual self in the liberal, democratic model.⁹⁶ And it is precisely this idea of the self and the ontological premises that undergird it which is at the heart of the crisis.

The problem for deep ecology here is not one of intention. It is certainly the goal of deep ecologists to move away from the liberal, individual, egoistic self as so defined and understood. The problem is one of extension. By extending rights discourse and language as the ‘solution’ one remains bogged in the same moral ground that produces the problem. The kind of mire that results from this, to name but one instance, is evident in Naess’s attempt to articulate the meaning of the universal right of all creatures to self-realisation. This universal right Naess suggests is not a prohibitive but a limiting norm for ‘we’ are always required to harm and kill the unfolding of certain others.⁹⁷ If this is so, one has to wonder, what does it limit? And under what circumstances? Leaving the ‘limits’ up to the individual at once returns us to the individual as the ethical and epistemological centre, a centre whose validity to the culture at large has already been discounted. Further, in so doing, there is little priority given at the individual or cultural level, to care for the other-than-human world. Indeed the lack of any viable, long term protection for the other-than-human world testifies to the extent to which human interests and rights invariably trump the competing and conflicting rights of other species. In this regard, the inter-species problem is but an expansion on the inter-personal, for rights discourse in returning us to the site of the individual takes us not to a holistic space but an inherently separate and competitive space. My right is my moral ground that I stand in *against* yours. The point at which rights are realised and present moral conflict (and resolution) is the point at which ‘I’ as an individual assert my right – to free speech for example – against your right – to not be slandered. How this contested and reified space of the self can be useful in moving away from this egoistic self towards the holist setting of self-realisation and ecological consciousness is very unclear. As will be discussed in more detail in the next section, this is particularly the case, when the experience of the self is not one that is situated in sustained, deep relationship with the other-than-human world but conversely is one that reinforces on a daily basis the experience of the egoistic, individual self that is separated, geo-physically and epistemologically from the other-than-human world. Even in the

⁹⁶ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

⁹⁷ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 167.

instance where rights are deemed universal, such as the right to free speech or clean water, where this right seems to collectivise it does not. For its universality applies to every single *individual* creature not to communities or relationships within communities. In so doing universal rights not only over-write other ways of knowing and being in place but also cast aside the ethical complexities and intuitions that arise out of specific, nuanced relationship. It seems rather that to effect, or at least proceed along, the path to the kind of transformation for which deep ecologists are hoping, the ‘idea’ of rights and egalitarianism need to be dispensed with in favour of a discourse that can succeed in moving away from the egoistic ‘self’.

However, even if we were to accept, for arguments sake, Naess’ claim at face value, and assume that his ‘intuition’ can function unaffected by the neo-liberal history in which it is embedded, the ultimate solution to which deep ecologists refer – that of transformation at the experiential level – presents yet deeper problems. These problems suggest quite a different mapping of the self to the ecological self for which the deep ecologists are hoping.

In arguing that ‘experience’ as the loci of a certain knowing, is the epistemological alternative to mainstream responses to the crisis and an alternative to ethical solution, Naess hopes to shift the individual’s environmental decision making process from what otherwise presents as a site of personal sacrifice. Rightly suggesting that, “when people feel that they unselfishly give up or even sacrifice their self-interests to show love for nature this is probably in the long run a treacherous base for conservation,”⁹⁸ he proffers the experience of ecological unity as the unselfish alternative. In this way it seems we both avert conversations that are limited to the ‘egoistic’ self, with the associated moral complexity and confusion, while moving towards ontological unity as the foundation of a wider, deeper, larger selfhood. Consequently, there is no sense of sacrifice for in acting to protect the rainforest one is, to use John Seed’s metaphor again, not forgoing but protecting oneself, “through the extension of the self, our ‘own’ best is also that of others. The own/not-own distinction survives only in grammar not in feeling.”⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology* (San Diego, CA: Avant Books, 1995), 229.

⁹⁹ Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 175.

Expanding on this, Naess names this relationship, as one of reciprocity. If I damage the rainforest I damage a part of myself. However, there are two core dilemmas here: one is, to understand that in damaging the rainforest one is damaging oneself one has to already have had sustained, deep connection with the rainforest at an experiential and not just an intellectual level. Yet it is precisely this kind of experience that is both epistemologically and physically not available to the culture at large. 'We', live at a farther and farther remove from the more-than-human world, where this world asserts its physical and epistemological claims on us. Even where this experience is available, in any given moment, it is rarely sustained, for the 'wilderness' is still the unknown - or the subjectively known. In the case of the former, there is no relationship with wild places and in the latter instance the relationship is not culturally validated. The wilderness is not a place that is lived in, it is certainly not home, rather it is visited and consumed. As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, experience, in late-modernity, is not a space for transformation at the individual or cultural level. For, in the contexts of late modernity, experience itself tends to not be a mode of connection or self-extending but a mode of consumption, a mode of self-filling. The ingesting experiential self, in this setting, is not the self that reaches out to the world but is the self that voraciously takes the world in. Experience, thus, more often than not, is but another site of distortion.

The second problem with deep ecology's use of experiential knowing is a logical one. Within an experiential context, it follows that, if I am damaged, I will damage the rainforest. This is a key problem that Naess and the deep ecologists overlook. For in advancing the experience of unity and connection as the solution to ongoing destruction they fail to theorise the site of the self as a cultural phenomenon, where damage is already at advanced, systemic levels. The problem is that the damage at the level of culture, in which the multitude of selves to which Naess is referring are immersed, is too vast and physically and epistemologically embedded, to allow 'experience' to be a way out. To the contrary, the experience available to most late modern selves, of depleted and shut off places, reinforces the cycle of destruction. Further, for those who 'visit' the wild, they primarily do not do so in a way that fosters or facilitates connection and continuity with such places. Rather, this landscape, is, from the car window, or the bungalow window, kept at significant epistemological and ethical distance. This is not a place that can be connected to, except by a minority - of which Naess is part. The minority, however, does not reflect and cannot be a solution to the pattern of being

human in the culture at large. By the deep ecologist's own logic, any given self, for whom experience is the mode of being in and responding to the world, has little choice but to keep damaging the rainforest. This is no more pressing then in late modernity where the excessively (and continuously) damaged site of the environment coupled with the premise of 'experience' as the key epistemological tool suggests a collation of excessively damaged selves. Such damage means as Snyder observes that "human beings themselves are at risk, not just on some survival or civilizational level, but more basically on the level of heart and soul."¹⁰⁰

Compounding this is not only *how* place is experienced but the kind of place that is experienced. The late-modern self is shaped and mapped not by rainforests, deserts and mountain lakes but by those places within which we are in *daily* epistemological exchange. These are the stairwells, car-parks, highways, shopping centres, florescent lit boardrooms and cemented, gridded, often homogenous and impermeable forms that compose our urban landscapes. This is not to suggest that the kind of self, shaped by such forms, is without goodness or moral virtue. This is not the nature of this observation. Rather, I suggest that this kind of self, in being moulded by the properties of the world within which she primarily moves, becomes necessarily less sensitive and responsive to the needs, calls, and subjectivity of other-than-human place. The other-than-human sphere is not that through which one's identity is carved, rather the late-modern self is increasingly existentially and epistemologically remote from the other and within such a setting experience is not the solution but the problem, for rather than transforming consciousness, it reinforces the given consciousness.

Further if one is to build an argument from materiality this need include all materiality. Yet we exist in a world saturated by plastic veneers and rigid impermeable structures which suggests we are primarily shaped by this world and its attendant structures, values and beliefs. This has the implication that among other things we too become less and less permeable and thus less able to receive and enter in to relationship with the other-than-human world. Herein Naess' point, that 'we are the mountains dancing' is correct but its very correctness is one that makes deep ecological alternatives unviable. While we respond to the world in kind, 'we' are today not the mountains dancing, largely they dance on the outskirts of human community. We are rather, the concrete blocking biotic

¹⁰⁰ Snyder, quoted in George Sessions, ed., *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1995), 44.

life. We respond still to the world, but firstly to the world in which we live, which is primarily one of concrete towers, super-highways, super-markets and throwaway objects that consume the very places Naess speaks of.¹⁰¹

Naess himself acknowledges this difficulty regarding built geographies, suggesting that;

rooms, interiors, stairs, farmyards, gardens, nearby trees, bushes – all these things become, on the whole unconsciously, a part of that which is ours, a powerful kind of gestalt. The geographic relationships are of great importance in an appraisal of urbanisation and design and its penetrating transformation of personality.¹⁰²

If we are to take seriously Naess's gestalt description of experience, then it follows that with changes in geographic relationship the whole will be changed in a – deleterious – way that is not accessible either at the conscious or the individual level. This form of experience and knowing cannot therefore be transformed by the individual by processes of conscious questioning – such as deep ecology advocates.

In this failure to theorise the site of the self, and by advancing the centrality of experience, deep ecologists inadvertently reinforce not identification but separation. In this, deep ecologists are faced with a double bind. If one is to assume that the late modern self is intact and unaffected by the places within which she dwells, this implies that this self is separate from these places, both in their geographical and cultural setting. Alternatively, if one assumes that the modern self is shaped by such places then the separateness and impermeability of such places will become the separateness and impermeability of the self. Deep ecologists are left then with the hyper-separate self that is separate *because* of her capacity to connect (with late modern forms) or the separate self that *cannot* connect and therefore does not get mapped by late modern forms or by the natural world. For either self, the knowing that may transform relationship with the other-than-human world in daily self-constructive experience is simply not available. And ethical decisions which may arise from a knowing of 'connection' are increasingly unlikely.

¹⁰¹ Plumwood makes a similar observation in describing the implications of the indistinguishability account of deep ecology, where the human self is "just as indistinguishable from the Coca-Cola bottle as it is from the rainforest."¹⁰¹ To be fair, deep ecologists would agree that 'Self realisation cannot be found through the coca-cola bottle or certain other urban forms, yet their failure to theorise the way the egoistic self *does* identify with and very easily collapses into these forms, produces a distorted sense of the potential for identification with the natural world.

¹⁰² Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, 61.

Indeed the failure to theorise the site of the self reflects the failure by deep ecologists to sufficiently theorise the site of culture.¹⁰³ And in this is the crux of the deep ecologists' problem, that it is the (unsituated) self that is seen as the conduit for cultural change. In their explication of certain values and goals and in stressing the need for such explication, deep ecologists make two false assumptions. The first is that 'fundamental' norms and values exist and function primarily in the 'individual' – and if these are accessed and challenged, cultural transformation can be had. The second is that ultimate norms and values are 'unearthed' primarily through an isolated process of self-reflection in the form of deep questioning, rather than through engagement in the world at large.

These mistakes have serious consequences for deep ecology as a tool for cultural change. Firstly, in situating the site of change and solution in the individual, the deep ecologists return us to the very ideology that is producing the crisis. A reliance on individual analysis in this instance is romantic in ideation, ahistorical in critique and antithetical to deep ecology's purported holist orientation. The recourse to the individual also moves one way from scrutiny of the culture out of which the individual is formed. This brings us to the second mistake – a failure to unearth the way in which norms and values are implicit and embedded in the cultural fabric and the way in which they therefore construct identity and the self. In an important sense, the individual does not choose those norms and values that determine and inscribe what it is to be human in the places and practices of daily life. Rather these form the larger historical and geo-physical web into which we, as temporary, contextual selves are woven. Self-reflection on these norms and values is rarely effective then in changing the collective nature of these norms and values. At best such reflection places us alone, in a 'world of wounds'.¹⁰⁴

Not only then does deep ecology take us no further along the path of cultural change but the 'idea' of place which it employs returns us to the cultural norm. Nature, in deep ecology, corresponds to nature as mapped in the discourse of the Romantic/Enlightenment model and to the ancient idea of the wild as that which is separate from and opposite to culture. In this respect, Plumwood argues, deep ecology, rather than challenging the dualist structure that defines western metaphysics,

¹⁰³ See also Plumwood's analysis of this and the way in which deep ecology reinforces dualist accounts of self and nature. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 166-188.

¹⁰⁴ From Leopold: "one of the penalties of an environmental education is that we live alone in a world of wounds." Leopold, quoted in Fox, *Approaching Deep Ecology*, 62.

reproduces it. This, she suggests, is chiefly reproduced through the denial of difference and the assimilation of the other into the self, that deep ecology's versions of the self advance. In looking for unity and oneness deep ecology fails to scrutinise the idea of the self and the human that gave rise to separation in the first place and to this extent fails to challenge this idea. The recognition of both continuity and difference are key, in Plumwood's account, to the overcoming of the dualist structures that separate the human from the other-than-human world and are at the heart of the historical devaluation and degradation of both women and nature.¹⁰⁵

In failing to theorise the separation of nature from culture, deep ecology faithfully represents the wild as an untainted source of renewal from which the tainted human can seek reconnection and wholeness. Thus the wild, in the historical tradition I have been documenting, continues in deep ecology translation to be defined against culture and in this definition forms part of the dualist logic where the more powerful side of the dualist structure (culture) homogenises, incorporates and hyper-separates from the disempowered side (nature). In this very idealising of nature, deep ecology does little to admit its otherness, the *different* and unique being of other life forms, or to examine the ontological and epistemological 'separation' from nature on which western culture relies.

By staying within the fundamental cultural premises of being human, those that shape relationship to place, deep ecology, at the same time, poses a false dichotomy, suggesting that only two alternatives exist - the mainstream 'shallow' response to the crisis or total identification with 'nature'. Not only does this dichotomy reinforce the cultural tendency to search for 'solution' rather than deep analysis of the problem (the distorted cultural) but in the process, it reproduces the failure of environmental discourse to theorise culture and the self, and to sincerely investigate the limitations of our epistemological models and what potentialities or lack of, these present, for being human.

¹⁰⁵ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 173-183.

Conclusion

In tracing the history of environmental protest and its relationship to the loss of ecological consciousness, a pattern emerges. What we witness with the rise of the protest movement is an equal rise in the destruction of the other-than-human world. Both seem to coincide. This does not, of course, suggest causality, while increased destruction may trigger more protest of a certain kind, increased protest does not, one would think, trigger increased destruction. Rather, a more subtle and important point is apparent, this is, that the rise of the protest movement is deeply implicated in a certain individualised, rights based culture. And this culture is one that depends, for its meaning, on the separation of the human from the other-than-human world and a consequent cultural imperviousness to the destruction of this world. A reluctance or incapacity to identify such stops us from seeing that ecological consciousness is diminishing rather than increasing over time, that consciousness *of* place relies on consciousness *in* place. If I am right in suggesting that we are living in times of diminished consciousness, this means that as much as we can speak of the desecration of place in some senses, at the level of culture we do not fully understand this loss, perhaps we are even immune to it. More problematically still, it seems, that we do not know that we do not know.

Reading the environmental protest movement as a story of diminishing efficacy, a story whose loss of ‘voice’ corresponds to the loss of place and relationship to place – the loss herein of ecological consciousness –, it bodes us well to consider alternative stories, those that have examined the malformations of culture, self and nature in a late-modern world. It is to this analysis that we shall now turn.

Empty

They were the
empty people
Emptying out their
days
emptying out
their ways
emptying out
their heads
their beds
emptying out,
their homes
their hearts,
their very
human parts.
To fill it
all
again
filling quickly up
with noise
with murk and waste
filling up with
haste and bother
running quickly
to another
thing
to fill
the empty spaces,
the empty silent
vacant faces,
and then
when all
is filled right
up
brimming, spilling
seeping
over
then the faces turn,
they stare
aghast
in disbelief
that all this
filling
spells merely grief
and
emptying out
again.

Chapter Four

Proof: The Search for the Self in Late Modern Life

“The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he’s in prison” Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

“If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest in the world.”¹

Some years ago I was returning from the East of Australia on that long red highway that stretches across the country to the West. Part of this is called, The Great Ocean Road. If you are not familiar with this particular three hundred kilometre expanse then it will be difficult for me to translate the breath-taking, awe-inspiring and perspective giving symphony of sea-sculpted limestone, stupendous cliff face and immense wild ocean that this ‘road’ provides access to. It is one of those places on earth that in its untainted magnificence both humbles and transports. You know those places, those few that still exist. So perhaps in knowing others you can imagine the power and presence of this encounter.

Due to its overwhelming beauty and undoubtedly for reasons of driver safety there are intermittent viewing platforms, walk trails, and rest areas where you can stop and be member to its salty, sandy, windswept magnificence. You can listen, breath in, touch, smell, be enveloped by its presence.

We were. But not completely. For what I cannot name as anything other than a cultural disturbance, perhaps a cultural sin of sorts broke the spell, the “spell of the sensuous.”² It was not anything

¹ Rob Williams, “Revealed: The third largest ‘country’ in world – Facebook hits one billion users,” *The Independent*, October 4, 2012, http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/____revealed-the-third-largest-country-in-the-world--facebook-hits-one-billion-users-8197597.html.

² *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World*, is the appropriate and evocative title, and subject, of David Abram’s examination of the alienation from the sensuous world, that characterises modern life. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

abnormal, indeed it was something very common. And yet it was also something deeply perverse. Its perversity in this particular place stood out like a neon sign polluting the land with its fluorescent gaze.

This perversity came in the form of the photo, the record. Yet what was perverse was not the photo itself. One understandably yearns to capture and hold on to the vision of such natural splendour. No, it was not simply the photo. Rather it was the subject. The images being snapped away at were not of this breathtaking piece of landscape but of the self. Land and sea were merely backdrop, panorama, a scenic 'environment'.

Within less than an hour of being perched on the cliff top overlooking this expanse, we witnessed bus load after car load after bus load of what could only be called spectators, swarming out of their vehicles, talking hurriedly, walking hurriedly, on their march to the photo-opportunity landmark. A minute hence they stood, smiling cheese, before quickly glancing around and within five, four, three minutes or less, hurriedly returning to their vehicles, satisfied, driving away, with proof, that they had in fact, been on the Great Ocean Road.

This bothered me for a long time. Innocuous perhaps to others, it seemed to me, albeit opaquely at the time, to signify a deep malaise. It was not just its quality of superficial engagement, it was something else, something much more disturbing. That drive was now twelve years ago. Since then my feelings of anger and incredulity have transmuted into a kind of despair, a worried sadness of sorts, a need to understand what is in fact going on. What is at the root of these phenomena and what links these behaviours, and much other, superficially disparate behaviour, together? Needless to say that within the ensuing years this pathological obsession with the self has only intensified, one need look no further than the proliferation and utilisation of social media sites for evidence of this. Yet the pathology of the self is to be found not only in the production and reproduction of the image of the self, this is simply its more recent and extreme manifestation, though one that I will argue threatens irreversible change for the fate of subjectivity. This pathology is found in saturated form in every dimension of our culture. And this pathology both in its incubus and in its proliferation feeds on the world.

Since the mid to late twentieth century the process of self-referencing has received increasing intellectual attention and has become a source of sophisticated speculation and debate.³ Yet this debate has been largely disconnected from conversations

³ Seminal theorists that have commented on this process include, Zygmunt Baumann, Jean Baudrillard, Theodor Adorno, Jurgen Habermas, and Max Horkheimer. The deformation of the self which these theorists document is attributed variously to the rise of the industrial world with its dehumanizing processes of mechanization, the domination of capitalism and the logic of the market place, the reign of bureaucracy with its efficiency, means driven rationale and the

surrounding the problem of rampant ecological destruction. Somehow the two are seen to be separate issues that are logically unrelated to each other. If the connection between the two is made, it is one that is generally material in nature, one that marks our habits of consumption, (but not the endless production and reproduction of images of the self), as those, which in draining natural ‘resources,’ are inherently unsustainable. In such conversations, the natural world as constituent of our very humanity is absent. In scrutinizing this fissure and drawing conceptual bridges across this divide, and in analysing the process of the objectification of the self, I argue that our cultural practises of self *construction* are implicitly and endemically woven into the practises, processes and outcomes of ecological *destruction*. In this, consumption, as a process both of self *construction* and ecological *destruction*, is key.

In particular, I want to draw attention to the distinction between consumption as an obsessive behaviour (widely documented), and consumption as an ontological form (widely undocumented). As a reasonably well-scrutinized behaviour, consumption emerges as cultural form with the collective influences of industrialisation, capitalism and urbanisation. In the digital age of late modernity, it produces what I am naming as the ‘record,’ the frenzy to photograph, film, blog, tweet, record any and every moment. The ‘record’ here presents, ostensibly, as the next material increment in an extended process of self-representation and self-externalisation. However, I am arguing that what the production of the record reveal is the (collective) search for *proof*. This search is not consumption intensified but rather represents a threshold change, a shift in the baseline of what it is to be a self. The self, in adopting consumption as an *ontological* form, becomes not the consumer but the consumed, becomes ultimately object. In this the possibilities for returning and relating to the world-as-other (i.e., not-self) are few. In this therefore the possibilities of knowing what it is to be human, to be a self are also few. In this, we need proof that we do, in fact, exist

It is, nonetheless, my hope, that if we cease to consider the late modern processes of self construction as merely futile, somewhat desperate and benign gestures but instead come to see them as deeply implicated in the malformation of our world, then the

tyranny of Enlightenment science at the expense of other epistemologies and other ways of being. Consumerism also features as derivative from, and enhancing of, these systems. While these are all powerful and significant analyses in their own right, insofar as they do not speak to the relationship between ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity (aside from Baumann who will be discussed in Chapter Five) they will not be included in this discussion.

other-than-human world may become less endangered and we, in the process, may come that bit closer to our human being. We may stop to smell the salt, the brine, the unfathomable itself in the Great Ocean breeze.

The Death of Subjectivity

That ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity are inextricably linked and exist together in a feedback mechanism is not immediately apparent. The agreed upon manifestations of the crisis in subjectivity, often referred to as the identity crisis,⁴ phenomena such as searing levels of depression, accelerating incidence of unprovoked homicidal outbursts, rising addiction rates, relentless consumption and generalised angst and despair are not considered to bear any necessary relation to ecological destruction, as found in deforestation, air and water pollution, over-fishing, widespread species extinction, global warming and ozone depletion, to name but a few phenomena. Popular wisdom and the majority of theoretical reflection associates cultural cause with cultural effect and ecological destruction with material cause, be this materiality culturally or ecologically situated.⁵ Thus despair, anger, feelings of meaninglessness and angst are

⁴ Key theorists that have so named and examined the identity crisis accompanying modernity and late modernity include, Albert Borgmann, Zygmunt Baumann, Charles Taylor and Hannah Arendt to name but a few of the more central writers. This alienation was also of course anticipated by earlier theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Consideration of different theoretical perspectives will be considered later in this chapter and in more detail in Chapter Five.

⁵ Yet it must be noted that significant connections between person and place are made by a number of writers, these include, Edward Casey, Jeff Malpas, Freya Mathews (see *Reinhabiting Reality* and *The Ecological Self*) and Glenn Albrecht, all of whom are discussed in more detail later. Mathews traces the destruction of place, of particular loved and known places to feelings of loss, disembeddedness and an unnamed sorrow. Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 1995). Malpas and Casey also discuss at length the extent to which place is key to beingness and to understanding human identity. Glenn Albrecht, a Western Australian eco-philosopher, likewise has coined the term Solastalgia to refer to the feelings of nostalgia and yearning for place that surface when loved and known geographies are destroyed and 'developed' in ways that make them no longer identifiable. However where these important writers and I diverge is in our particular theoretical focus. The writers here, primarily focus on particular relationships with place or the effects of the loss of place on the human. While this is in indeed an important focus, my attention is on the feedback relationship, how loss of place perpetuates loss of identity, and this in turn perpetuates further ecological destruction. I also am concerned with the way identity is not merely challenged but *shaped* by the places in which we dwell, thus the possibilities for self-hood are closed down where place as a permeable, living, space is closed down. What I am referring to in this instance is a cultural pattern, a mode of being that exerts a collective and somewhat catastrophic effect both on the self and on place and is one that fails to be perceived by those who are most deeply embedded in its machinations.

theorised to be the result of a range of cultural variables, which can include, adverse socio-economic conditions, frenetic modern living, the dissolution of the extended family system, the rise of the nuclear and suburban model of family life, longer working hours, and/or changing lifestyle expectations. At a deeper and more theoretical level such phenomena are often attributed to the alienating forces of a mechanized, industrial, capital driven framework. In essence such angst, its dysfunctions and outbursts are understood as a consequence of any one of many socio-economic pressures. Likewise deforestation and other ecological ills are typecast as the result of social and economic demand for more ‘resources’, for example, more timber, woodchips, arable land to grow grain for an ever exploding population, or again on slightly deeper analysis, deforestation, as an ecological ill, is attributed to corporate greed and the general disinterest and avarice of a consumer fed population. Within such thinking, phenomena such as species extinction, deforestation, air and waterway pollution, crime, addiction, anger and angst, not only fail to be systemically linked, they are barely linked at all.

The failure to make this connection, is in part, due to the linear cause-effect model we access for explanation, regarding changes in both social and ecological phenomena. Part of the limitations involved in the speculation that A, B and C collectively or in succession cause D is the assumption that A and B and C are *separate* from D.⁶ If we step past this model and consider the phenomena in question not as logically or contextually separate but as contiguous, existing together in necessary relation then the associations to be made appear quite different. What I am suggesting is not that deforestation is a direct result of over consumption, or that over consumption is a direct result of deforestation in the standard cause and effect model, where both phenomena exist as separate ‘catalysts’, ‘results’ or ‘events’. Rather, I am suggesting, that the mode of being human prescribed by and inscribed in our culture makes possible and in the late modern chapter of this logic, systemically produces, species extinction, deforestation, ozone depletion and widespread ecological degradation. Deep relation with and deep caring for the earth is incompatible with considering oneself as separate from and not at home on the earth. And further by building these considerations into nearly every social and physical structure, deep relation and caring become increasingly implausible. It is the case, as Midgley reminds us, in quoting the molecular biologist Jacques Monod, that, “the ethic of knowledge that created the modern world is the only one compatible with

⁶ The simple but profound observation of the way in which our culture shapes a difference into a separation issues from the great mind of Gregory Bateson.

it.”⁷ The ultimate outcome of this ethic also makes possible and unavoidable over consumption, social discord and an intensifying anxiety, malaise and despair. The link that draws this anxiety, malaise and despair into the circle of species extinction and waterway pollution tells both of a certain way of being human and a certain way of searching for the knowledge that we are human. These phenomena in other words share the same ontological and epistemological foundations.

If to be human in our culture, is, as I have argued, to be separate, to not be of or belong to this earth, then the task of human being in the face of mortal evidence to the contrary is to prove this separation and lack of belonging. This quest has, as I have suggested, for the long stretch of history been explicitly named and conducted. To be human has meant to be in possession of a soul, to be a part of the divine purpose and plan. One has known of this distinction through knowing God and one has verified such knowledge through faith in or proof of God’s existence; with the latter usually being found in miracles or the miracle of (human) life *per-se*. Once departed from this mortal coil, the God abiding individual is ultimately returned to the rightful place of human being and belonging, the eternal, changeless heavenly sphere. With the emergence of those forms of thinking, knowing and being that came to be defined as the Enlightenment and with the consequent domination of these modes the search for proof continued but lost its theological dimension. Here, the ontological framing of the human as separate from, superior to and not of this earth remained but God as proof of one’s separation ceased to be the default position.⁸ With this cessation, the ‘project’ and ‘question’ of human being was closed off from cultural analysis. This is because the question was now answered. To be human became to know of separation *per-se*. All that was left was to search for more and more evidence of this separation. This proof is not to be found in God’s work nor is it to be found in the sheer fact of human life. It is to be found in more and more, objective, conscious, knowing – the proof of separation. For this reason, it is no surprise that, rarely, if ever, in social discourse and public life, certainly never in dominant media, is the question of “*What is it to be human?*” asked.

⁷ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

⁸ I am talking here about cultural patterns and collective attachments. So in this regard I am not suggesting that God as an object of faith no longer subsists. Rather I am suggesting that this faith exists in the only way which within modernity it can, as a matter of private, ethical concern. The cultural collective on the other hand mediates being not through knowing God but through knowledge itself. This cultural demise of theology as a working premise of humanity is one Nietzsche marks when he has the madman proclaim that “God is dead!”

That this absence, after its millennia long formulation and discussion by society at large, is not seen as peculiar, is further evidence of the extent to which the answer has – for all cultural intents and purposes – been provided.⁹ The answer surrounds us in concrete and digital form. It is found in the cultural frenzy for more and more information. The more information we gather the more we know. And in such knowing is our humanity. Cartesian thought, mind, knowledge is, in late modern translation, that which establishes human being.

This is an important and interesting transition point for the fate of the self and subjectivity in late modernity. If we recall the figure of Gilbert White discussed in Chapter One, we remember that with his departure was the demise of a certain form of co-habitation, a certain and well established form of being and knowing. This form of being and knowing was embedded and engrained in the other-than-human and the immediately human community in which he lived. It was a form of world navigation, understanding and literacy that spoke of a self in relation to that which was other-than-self. His knowing, while not named as such at the time, would retrospectively be described as subjective.

What saw the dusk of Gilbert White's 'subjective' epistemology also saw the dusk of religion as the central working explanation of human separation.¹⁰ Waning religious faith was married to waxing scientific faith and increasing dedication to the scientific method, not simply as a form of knowing, but as a form of being. This method invalidated the subject in the pursuit of truth and knowledge of the object, and in the pursuit of objectivity as an epistemological form. Eventually, it would make sense for our humanness, our separateness, to be grounded in the search for culturally viable, testable, provable, objective knowledge. It also makes sense that this search, in maintaining a 'safe' epistemological distance, approaches and scrutinizes the world as object. Insofar

⁹ Even its ethical counterpart, "What does it mean to be a good person?" is, in everyday conversation, rarely discussed. However the question of what it is to be happy - pleased, satisfied, successful and healthy, as a self, is a matter of ongoing concern and conversation. This, I concur, is because the former question situates the self in community with others whereas the latter, in tangent with the late-modern preoccupation with the self, positions aspirations and ideals firmly within the individual.

¹⁰ The ways White co-existed in and understood his world in relation to his human and other-than-human kin did not supersede or replace but existed alongside the theological framework. His being was positioned in its ontological and ethical dimensions by the theological model yet he was placed, one may suggest 'homed' by the intimate and daily association he had with the creatures, critters, sounds and seasons that constituted Selborne.

as to know the world in a certain way is to be in the world in a certain way, it becomes apparent that in the domination of objective knowledge is the death not just of God but of subjectivity. For, in the search for objectively provable, verifiable knowledge subjective knowledge, alongside the subject, becomes culturally invalid, peripheral to the task and project of human being – at a core level the subject becomes existentially irrelevant.

The rise of the object as the site of knowing, and thus of being, was accelerated and amplified by the mutually reinforcing networks of industry, technology, or as Hougan describes, technique,¹¹ bureaucracy and capitalism that came to (and continue to) dominate nineteenth century, twentieth century, and now twenty-first century life. These together made possible and plausible the rapid and systematic extraction of communities and individuals from embeddedness in other-than-human and intimately human community. The outcome of this for late modern life is that the forging of separation, having being carved in its millennial long march into both our ecological and cultural geographies, is now carved into our epistemological forms and models. Our search for, and accumulation of, knowledge, is one which has become separate from relationship with place, community and ultimately the self. This is not only insofar as knowledge is held within the sharp and rational definitions of expert discourse and the organised archives of libraries and digital networks, it is not only a separation of content it is equally a separation of form. That which was set to *define* our human being and thus our sense of self has become through our own paradigms *separate* from our human being and what it is to be a self.¹²

Our primary ontological mistake, of rejecting the mortal confines of being human and thus making the fact of human difference, from other species and land-forms, into a point of human separation from other species and landforms,¹³ and of building this separation into our worlds has resulted in a profound epistemological failure. We now can no longer know what it is to be human for the objective knowledge that (ostensibly)

¹¹ Jim Hougan provides a fascinating account of the way in which technique and the means driven logic that it subsists by, has come to form and deform every human interaction. Jim Hougan, *Decadence: Radical Nostalgia, Narcissism and Decline in the Seventies* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975).

¹² Evidence for this fate can be found in the fore mentioned failure of exponential knowledge accumulation to affect, relieve or in any way mitigate the ‘environmental’ crisis.

¹³ Again, the description of the core mistake of our culture, as one where a difference is turned into a separation, is the insight of Gregory Bateson.

tells of our humanity is that which is *separate* from the subject. Further, any subjective knowing the self lays claim to, in lacking objective verification, bears no cultural value. We have thus become separate and disconnected both from the geo-physical contexts by which life makes sense and within which subjectivity emerges and from our erroneous, albeit all-pervasive, evidence of what it is to be – human. Consequently what I suggest we are witnessing in the late modern frenzy to represent, record and ‘view’ the self is the desperate search for proof that we as selves, as subjects, in any real and meaningful way exist.

In this desperate search, and the distortions of the world and the self which it gives rise to, there is a particular danger. This is the feedback nature of this cycle. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, however it is important here to make a few prefacing comments about the nature of this feedback. The feedback is one that does not cycle within but between the contours of ecology, epistemology and ontology. The feedback relation of, for example, species extinction or environmental calamity and angst, means that due to both sharing the same ontological and epistemological foundations the exacerbation of one exacerbates the other. The logic is self-perpetuating. Our response, for instance to, species extinction, which, in diminishing the template of the other, to ‘difference’, diminishes relation to that which is required for understanding ourselves as human and as membered to specific geo-physical texts,¹⁴ sends us off on a search for more knowledge, usually about the species in question, their environment, or the environmental effects of their extinction. Yet it is this form and type of knowledge, which in reinforcing the culture/nature divide, reinforces the mode of being human that is responsible for species extinction amidst other ills. It is also knowledge, that, in accordance with the working western definition of human being and the structures we have put in place to affirm this, is now separate from our experience of ourselves as selves. It cannot therefore produce behaviours which stem patterns of destruction, to the contrary it is that which, in detailing the separation of the human from the ‘object’ of knowledge and research, ultimately reinforces patterns of destruction.

¹⁴ I am not at all intending here to cast aside or underestimate the stark tragedy of species extinction in its own right. Rather, I am suggesting that, unless we can somehow cultivate a consciousness of the relationship our acts of mindless destruction bear to our acts of equally mindless self construction, this tragedy will continue

At the same time, in seeking remediation to the loss of subjectivity in the form of knowledge that is available to the culture, that of the object, the consumption of the world escalates. Herein the not-self, the ecological (and increasingly cultural) ‘other’, is literally destroyed to feed the industrialist and capitalist processes whereby self construction is sought. In the destruction of place one is drawn further and further from relationship to that which is not self, that from within which subjectivity could emerge. Thus, subjectivity further diminishes while the search for it becomes more intense – and is sought in processes of self-reflection as found in the object. The more this cycle continues the more it approaches a closed system. This, Hougan refers to as a ‘chreod.’¹⁵

The behaviour that is being executed at the level of the self to redress the loss of subjectivity is, in this way, a mirror image of the behaviour that is executed at the level of culture to redress ‘ecological’ problems. In both instances a conscious and material, epistemological solution (seeking respectively to know the self exists and to know more about ecological problems and processes) is being sought for what is in fact – the same – non-conscious, immaterial, ontological error. This reinforces the systems sub-errors for the epistemological solution is itself a product of the ontological error. Both instances suffer therefore the distorting and duplicating effects of false description, where the situation is not relieved but intensified by the solutions sought to redress it.¹⁶ What this means for the fate of subjectivity in late modern life is its continued dissolution and, ultimately I will argue, its loss. To interrupt this cycle what is required is not only a reanalysis of our relationship to those spaces, places and creatures we name as the other but also a reanalysis of the boundaries of that which we understand to be and name as the self and what I suggest is, in late modernity, the voracious self.

The Consuming Self

To begin to understand what we are speaking of when we speak of a self, we need to look not to any one individual self, inasmuch as the sense of self-hood that permeates

¹⁵ Hougan, *Decadence*, 63.

¹⁶ Again I owe my understanding of the nature of feedback cycles and how they operate in ecological/cultural settings to the work of Gregory Bateson, specifically, his writing on the *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. The systems properties and effects of the crisis will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

our culture. If we are to strip the individual bare of any defining uniqueness and consider it simply as an entity, its defining quality is, its form. This, one could suppose, is a discrete material form with an outer boundary of skin. This form is differentiated at the level of perception from other forms – though certain physicists and sceptics may wish to contest this. The problem however, is that in this late modern chapter of the ‘crisis,’ we are suffering from a diffusive and profound anxiety, a doubt, that this form, which we call the self, in any real and meaningful way exists.

This doubt is obviously not material, given that we can mark the physical boundary of the self, off from other physical forms. I know where you end and I begin and the way in which the table, the tree and the post-man are not me. Rather, the doubt, the anxiety, is existential in nature. This, at a deep cultural level is, I propose, rooted in anxiety surrounding the termination of existence in death. However, the outcome of denying and sublimating this anxiety, alongside destroying the contexts whereby it can be alleviated (nature and the sense of the sacred/belonging to the whole), and the resultant disembeddedness from the other-than-human world, has produced an existential crisis such that one cannot be assured of one’s existence, one’s selfhood in life. Within this psychic unrest our modern lives have become an endless search for proof. This search for proof is currently pursued by the incessant preoccupation with photographing, filming, posting and making visually present any and every moment of one’s existence, to garner evidence that one endures and one exists. This search is not conscious. In tirelessly documenting the self, one knows not for what one searches. The search, as here described, forms part of the collective, non-conscious psyche. As it is here too, in this non-conscious space, that the anxiety feeding the crisis resides.

This search in many senses builds upon and has its form set by patterns of consumption. The extended historical tendency to externalise the self, seeking images and reflections of the self in material objects, and through this constructing identity, together with the process of making the ‘other’ instrumental, invisible and peripheral to the process of self-construction, was given systemic and systematic reign in the mid to late twentieth century age of consumption. This was facilitated obviously by the fore-stated rise of industry, technology and capitalism and the way in which these forms severed the (western) human community from embeddedness in the natural world and repositioned the bulk of the population in dense, urban, industrial contexts dominated by human products and human forms. To understand the complexity of this transition

we need to consider the point(s) at which the consuming self, morphed into the voracious self.

From Consumer to Consumed: the Voracious Self

The will to consume has been documented as reflecting a denial of and a rallying against mortality,¹⁷ a millenarian anxiety transposed into self-absorption and decadence,¹⁸ and a vehicle through which cultural choice can be expressed.¹⁹ This latter position closely corresponds to the popular post-modern perspective that consumption in its various forms, but primarily through its utilisation of electronic and digital technology, is a socio-political forum of endless self-reinvention, and in this regard is considered neither a dysfunctional nor deforming phenomenon but one of liberation and power.²⁰

All of these perspectives, I want to suggest, aside from the latter post-modern interpretation, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, are useful ways of looking at and interpreting the culture of consumption. Self-extension as mediated by consumption has functioned as and continues to function as a veil from mortality, a defence against vulnerability and as a compulsive antidote to a lack of control and power in the face of cultural and ecological threats. However, I contend that what we are witnessing at this period in time, is something that takes us beyond these tendencies and dysfunctions. Consumption, while still remaining a defensive behaviour, has evolved into consumption as a distorted and distorting form, one that beckons a threshold change, a shift in the baseline of what it is to be human. Part of the reason why this transition remains largely undetected and part of the reason why consumption remains hyper-separated from observations of persistent and rising ecological destruction, is due to a strong theoretical focus that suggests mass consumption derives from the limitations of identity mapping in the context of a bureaucratic, mechanical

¹⁷ See Dennis Smith, *Zygmunt Baumann: Prophet of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Horgan, *Decadence*.

¹⁹ Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003).

²⁰ This claim is made by advocates of post-modernity, not by those who critique, late or post-modern life.

order. Under this interpretation, consumption is simply a response to various forms of political and social closure. Accordingly, the destruction of place that consumption wreaks, and the consequent loss of capacity to be a self and to know oneself as a self, that these habits produce, are by and large unaddressed. Consciousness of these connections is also stymied by the alternative tendency in post-modern discourse to consider consumption a key forum for political and social choice. This latter perspective, which interprets or rather misinterprets consumer potential with the creation of a dynamic, free space replete with social and personal possibility is detailed by Aldridge in his discussion of cultural omnivourism. Aldridge describes consumption as a space within which one can break free from classification and in the fashion of an omnivore sample all the world has to offer:

...one can listen to new age in the morning, ballet music in the afternoon and heavy metal in the evening, without ever becoming a pagan, a balletomane or a head banger.²¹

The (implicit) claim here is that one can be endlessly culturally diverse and free to graze without the restraints of attachment to any one group, genre or identity, and that within this process identity is not threatened, indeed it is crafted. McLuhan, while identifying the significance of the form – the medium – as a reality shaping force,²² by which logic incessant consumption shapes the person into the consumer, similarly maintains that the production (and implicitly consumption) made available by the technologies of the electronic age is in fact a liberating space, which, when eventually disengaged from its immersion in residual mechanical mediums, will allow us to live mythically, integrally, in depth, and in harmony. However this is only convincing insofar as one considers human existence to be a viable and meaningful pursuit, when removed as far as possible from the other-than-human world. However, this existence is one that, I suggest, exists outside the realm where subjectivity can be realised. When not only the material but the existential effects of ecological destruction are considered, it becomes apparent that this experiential medley is indicative not of hybridization, liberation and fluidity, but rather of the dissolution of the places and spaces where a coherent and cohesive identity can be found. Indeed the dependence on place for the development of personal and cultural

²¹ Aldridge, *Consumption*, 91.

²² See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968).

identity has been a theme traced by a number of writers. Escobar,²³ Malpas,²⁴ Katz,²⁵ Casey,²⁶ and Mendieta²⁷ all speak of the way the western philosophical tradition (and often theology) alongside much recent theory, has valorised absolute, space and time while completely disregarding place. Casey writes that for an entire epoch, by which he means the last three hundred years, “place has been regarded as an impoverished second cousin of time and space, those two colossal cosmic partners that tower over modernity.”²⁸ This, according to these thinkers, is variously due, to the emotive, personal and particularised character of place, a character that does not correspond to the clean, objective lines of modern science and modern thought. It is also due, as Malpas writes, to the fragility and changefulness of place, that in mirroring our own fragile, mortal condition is for this very reason rejected, in favour of the eternity and certainty of space. Malpas also draws attention to the way that place requires a form of relational engagement and consideration that is beyond the ken of abstract theory. As these writers have charted, this abjection has grave consequences both for place and for subjectivity, which requires relationship with place. Place is the other and the other is the “necessary presupposition of my own consciousness”²⁹ ... it is what makes my consciousness of me available.”³⁰

The significance here rests, not only, on the dissolution of place as an inter-subjective text but also on the construction of other kinds of places, non-places that have encroached on place. These non-places, as Augé discusses, are the places within which modernity is mired, they are not abiding places, where one lingers, where one is at home, but are places that one passes through – places of transit. Essentially they are

²³ Arturo Escobar, “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization,” *Political Geography* 20 (2001): 139-174.

²⁴ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²⁵ Eric Katz, “Authenticity and Place. The Authenticity of Place in Culture and Nature: Thoughts on the Holocaust in the Spanish Synagogue of Venice,” *Philosophy and Geography* 5, no. 2 (2002): 195-211.

²⁶ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

²⁷ Eduardo Mendieta, “The City and the Philosopher: On the Urbanism of Phenomenology,” *Philosophy and Geography* 4, no. 2 (2001): 203-218.

²⁸ Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), xiv.

²⁹ Sartre, quoted in Mendieta, “The City and the Philosopher: On the Urbanism of Phenomenology,” 210.

³⁰ Mendieta, “The City and the Philosopher: On the Urbanism of Phenomenology,” 210.

empty spaces to be filled. These include airports, bus-stations, super-markets, train stations, elevators, car-parks, stairwells, roads. Indeed it is interesting and disturbing to observe the increasingly prevalent creation of non-places encroaching on actual place. Where so many 'public' spaces used to be places of dwelling they are now no more. Street benches are now designed or modified in order that they not be slept on; parks are only to be utilised in certain hours, dogs, cats, fires, drinking are usually not allowed, beaches and town squares are heavily regulated and the bush itself is a user-pays terrain. The earth in short is being crafted into a non-place, not a place to linger, not a place to be at home, for it is not, after all, where we belong. The empty space of non-place is clearly not where we can find, or know ourselves, as human.

Real places, as Auge suggests, in contrast to non-places, are 'relational, historical and concerned with identity.'³¹ In thus shaping the world into non-places, where relation and thus the tapestry of history cannot be woven, we are shaping a world where identity cannot be fostered. Sharing and amplifying this world of non-place is the world of self-produced space, that "complex skein of cable and wireless network that mobilize extra-terrestrial space for the purposes of communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself."³² It is this empty, mobile space, alongside the vacant and transient places, that enables the fluidity to which Aldridge and McLuhan refer. This fluidity allows us to travel between such realms, consecutively and apparently seamlessly. Yet the very vacancy of such space, reveals the nature of this travel to be not one of integration or embeddedness but one of superficial engagement. What may appear therefore as fluidity and freedom, is in fact the loss of the intimate and proximate demands of place. Instead the endless, because empty, *space* of possibility, of consumption, becomes the dominant mode by which one experiences the world.

Aldridge's and McLuhan's failure to identify the distortion of these places and the desperation with which they are met consists in their tendency to equate the world of 'goods' and the process of consumption with social and cultural choice. Where consumer choice or forms of self-expression and extension are seen to exist, cultural choice is seen to exist. And by association choices for the self and the reinvention of the

³¹ Marc Auge, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super Modernity* (New York: Verso, 1995), 78.

³² Auge, *Non-Places*, 103.

self are seen as authentic possibilities. Whereas in fact while consumption is the driving and dominant force of culture it does not offer authentic cultural ‘choice’ but rather reinforces fundamental cultural premises in their most recent, prevalent and distorted form. This distortion has made other modes of being not more but less accessible. Albert Borgmann in *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* makes an analogous observation, citing the way in which once certain fundamental choices are made other choices become unavailable:

A consumer is in a morally weak position in the same way that anyone is relatively helpless in the exercise of daily decisions. Daily decisions are pre-formed by fundamental decisions. The fundamental and material decisions that have shaped the technological society leave little leeway to the daily decisions of the consumer.³³

To illustrate this he uses the example of the television, suggesting that once television has been introduced as a ‘given’ into the household the shape of human relations shift. The possibilities, once the new framework has been introduced, are no longer between reading a book, writing a letter, playing a game, telling stories or watching television but are reduced to the singular possibility of: “What are we going to watch tonight?”³⁴

It is important to be aware that in instances such as these, the fundamental decisions are not made by chance and neither are they consciously made – at the level of the individual or culture. The spell television casts on daily life is driven both by the silencing of other alternatives, by the kind of form television is and how this releases one from the need to navigate self. Television, offering a hyper-real world, lures the viewer into a world seemingly rich in relation and drama but one devoid of responsibility, this is a world that can be turned off (or on) at the flick of a switch. As such, it stands outside of the material demands of a finite, complex world and however temporarily dupes the viewer into believing that she too stands outside of this world. Temporarily she is offered proof.

In the same way that television sidelines other modes of being in world, the emergence of consumption as an ontological form means other forms of being become increasingly redundant. The now centralised task of consumption is reflected in the adjectival description of the modern human, as not citizen, as not even ‘individual’ but as merely,

³³ Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 114.

³⁴ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 112.

‘consumer.’ Consumption is not thus one act of doing amidst other possible acts. It is for all social and political purposes who we *are*.³⁵ The self, through this process, is not existing in the space of fluid and liberated reinvention, but is being more firmly cast in the space of rigid cultural definitions. To assume otherwise is to fail to consider the way in which the ‘consumer’ rather than simply acting on, or acting out on the world, is herself being shaped by this world. As McLuhan observes:

It is one of the ironies of Western man that he has never felt any concern about invention as a threat to his way of life. The fact is that, from the alphabet to the motorcar, Western man has been steadily refashioned in a slow, technological explosion that has extended over 2500 years.³⁶

This refashioning as McLuhan reminds us, delivers with it, limits for other ways of being human. He argues that we, as humans, are shaped by the ‘medium’ within which we move, think and feel, and that:

...not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary “closure” of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented.³⁷

However, as signalled earlier, McLuhan while providing this seminal tool of cultural analysis does not follow through on its deeper implications. While he draws key distinctions between the mediums which have at any given time dominated social life, he fails to scrutinise the more embracing medium, the culture as *form*, which shapes and misshapes social, ecological and individual life. Instead, he cites the mechanical order as the most dominant pattern in the modern world. Having been drenched in mechanical forms, we, as beings, have become subject to and shaped by the logic of the machine. As a consequence, the operations of production and the market place – those of centralisation, fragmentation and exchange value – have come to characterise human relations. The mechanical form is to be distinguished from the use value and holist orientation that McLuhan suggests formerly characterised tribal life. However overtaking both the holist and the mechanical is what McLuhan names as the current

³⁵ In analysing identity in terms of the phenomena of reality t.v., Nicholls writes that, “Our subjectivity is less that of citizens, social actors or ‘people’, than of cyborg collaborators in the construction of a screen-world whose survival hinges upon a support system designed to jack us into the surrounding commodity stream, around which an entire aesthetic of simulated pleasure exists.” Bill Nicholls, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 54.

³⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 270.

³⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 329.

‘electronic’ form of human extension, a form characterised by what he refers to as ‘cool’ mediums, those mediums which are high in participation or ‘completion by the audience’.³⁸ Hot mediums, by contrast, are those that characterise mechanical forms of extension and are low in participation and do not require ‘completion’ by the audience. The cool medium of the electronic, against the hot and rigid mechanical, is one that McLuhan suggests makes available freedom of choice, freedom of opportunity and self-reinvention.

However what I suggest is occurring, in the production of late modern life, is a phenomenon that supersedes McLuhan’s distinctions between the electronic and the mechanical. This is apparent to the extent that the space for relational experience is closing down whilst consumption as the primary mode of experience is becoming the norm. In this respect, experience of the world through electronic or mechanical means, is subsidiary to the practise and process of consumption itself as the primary experience. Further, the supposedly free and available space of the electronic age that McLuhan outlines, stands in stark contradiction to the everyday reality of an increasingly constrained, controlled and frantic populace. If the medium is indeed the message then the story it tells includes not simply the purpose it serves and the ways of behaving that gather around that purpose, but its elemental logic. What we are witnessing and participating in, is the domination of neither a mechanical nor an electronic medium, nor any medium that is merely derivative of technological capacity, but the domination of the medium of consumption itself, as the mode and practise of being human. The idea is of course that ‘you’ can be anything you so choose – retro, hipster, geek, Christian, Muslim, vegan, carnivore. But *how* you become or choose between these identities is through the choice of the kinds of things, experiences, sights, sounds, smells, you consume. Implicated in the very logic of such ‘choice’ is non-attachment to any one decision, the consumer is ultimately king, reigning over his palace of available goods and experiences. To be so unattached is to be not within the experience, connected and committed, but to stand always outside, to choose one’s ever tenuous identity and never have that choice taken away by the influence of the human and other-than-human world. Transpiring in late modernity is not then a technological progression, an ‘all at once’ that makes multiple forms of being possible, but the

³⁸ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 25.

inevitable conclusion of a cultural logic that increasingly makes only one form of (non) being possible – the form of the object.

This logic was, until more recent times, restrained by the presence and participation of the natural world in human texts. Place as a necessary component of what was, for a long time, a primarily rural existence could not be abstracted nor systematically destroyed, as it came to be in ensuing centuries. Even while, during much of the development of the western mind, the definition of the human remained enlisted to the theological, separation from the earth, while epistemologically claimed, was not in real terms available. Daily engagement with other species and with the local places within which one lived was still a component of everyday life. With little change in place came little change in modes of being human. Yet as the well documented rise of merging industrial, technological and political revolutions testifies, structured separation from relationship with other creatures and earthy life soon infiltrated every human modality. As political revolutions gave form to the individual and the mechanics of industrial life situated the person within human dominated, regulated and controlled systems physical ‘evidence’ of separation started to accumulate. With each new and more efficient form of technology the ontological premise of human exclusivity was reflected and reinforced in the place(s) where people lived. Consequently place increasingly reflected a certain kind of human, a certain kind of self.³⁹

This kind of place and kind of self finds its most ‘perfect’ instantiation’ ‘in the permanent, unchanging, picture-perfect, ‘purpose-built’ town in Florida, North-America named Celebration. This Disney built contrivance houses 11,000 people over 30,000 acres in a master-planned, tightly controlled project which does its best to avoid, dependence on, responsibility for and connection with, reality. In Celebration the:

...streets are lit by olde world lanterns and you are followed everywhere by muzak from the 40s and 50s piped out of speakers hidden beneath palm trees. Jingle Bell Rock, Santa Claus Is Coming to Town, Oh Come All Ye Faithful – the theme is unrelentingly Christmas ... The 40ft Christmas tree has plastic needles. The ice rink in the central square is a sheet of white plastic. At first glance the snow that falls on the hour, every hour on winter evenings looks as convincing as fake snow

³⁹ I stress once more here that in this conversation, while speaking in terms of ontology, I do so with specific reference to the western cultural framework. Even while the effect of this culture and its errors has spilled over to other cultures, (and to many places) I do not mean to imply that these cultures partake in the ontological and epistemological error that characterises western culture.

could, until you realise the artifice is double-layered: it's not artificial snow but shaving cream.⁴⁰

The town, where all is artifice, including a strict code for behaviour, even personal greetings, an absolute adherence to aesthetics, and commitment to appearance, symbolized in the manmade lake in the centre of the town (sufficiently elevated to prevent the inflow of surrounding swampland which was destroyed to create Celebration but exists still at the margins) is the ultimate product, fixing the citizens and the place to a life-denying, pseudo-reality that in the illusion of living in *real* peace, community and reality devours and destroys the life, vitality, diversity and safety of the actual creatures and places from which the production of this illusion feeds.

The idea(l) of Celebration is one that in freezing place, freezes chance, change and time. In this way it reflects and reinforces the ongoing cultural changes in relation to time, and space that symbiotically and collectively closed down connection with other-than-human places and other-than-human beings. Jay Griffiths identifies the way in which time (like place) as a key constituent of our daily experience and identity formation, has too become subject to the lineal, fragmenting, and homogenising fabric of modernity:

...in the West, since the early years of this century, time has been increasingly homogenized ... more than anything, modernity's time, – the global present – is increasingly standardized, increasingly the *same*.⁴¹

This homogenization of time is, as Griffiths observes, at odds with the natural world's nuanced, particularised and embedded time. Nature's time, unlike clocked time, *places* you, in relation to the seasons, to light, sounds, smells, to migrations, hibernations, nestings, fruitings, flowerings, shedding and dormancy. Modern time by contrast is "linear, artificial, over fragmented, modelling itself in the image of its machinery."⁴² Within this framework, clocks as Griffith's points out are needed precisely because there is no other way of telling the time available, there is no other way *known*. In this way we can see that time, like place, is moulded by the ontological premise of separation.

Like place, time has become separate from the subject and from subjective experience, a minute, for instance, is not the same as any given experience of that minute, rather it can

⁴⁰ Ed Pilkington, "How the Disney Dream Died in Celebration," *The Guardian*, December 14, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/13/celebration-death-of-a-dream>.

⁴¹ Jay Griffiths, *Pip Pip: A Sideways Look at Time* (London: Flamingo, 1999), 13.

⁴² Griffiths, *Pip Pip*, 12.

be anything to anyone, it is Aldridge's free, open and empty space of possibility, as such it is ready to be consumed. This time consists of units that are more or less well 'spent', or in fact 'wasted'. 'I have wasted so much time today' or, "I have spent too much time on this," are readily familiar ways of expressing the experience of one's days/ months/ years, indeed one's life. But how is it possible to *spend* or *waste* time? Time is not a currency to be cashed in, to be exchanged or traded, but is the continuum within which we dwell. Yet in the same quantitative vein we perceive those who have more time to be of more cultural value – these include the young – who have an open future to be 'spent' potentially any way they wish, and the wealthy who 'spend' their time how they please, who have consumer 'choice' in relation to time. To the contrary those, such as the elderly, who have little time left, are accordingly devalued. This is in stark and obvious contrast to indigenous cultures who have a radically different relationship to place and endless, circling time and who, as a consequence, value their elderly over and above their young for the qualitative value they bring to community, as compared to the quantitative 'potential' that more time offers.⁴³ Time in the Westernised sense ceases to be a context within which life unravels but becomes an external other, an object and a tally against which life is assessed, often a thing against which one 'races'. Consequently in charting the course of fixed, lineal, fragmented time, as a separate phenomenon from nature's cycles and rhythms, we have created this fixed, lineal and fragmented character as the nature of lived time, as the experience of our lives. To our clocked consciousness it presents as true and eternal and validates, in the process, the lack of consideration given to the times and the places of the natural, uncounted world. It is as Griffith's remarks, synthetic, and to "live in a synthetic ever present-present is to live not in the fullness but in the *emptiness* of time."⁴⁴

It is this emptiness and endlessness that marks the void. That we have produced the void in three dimensions should come as no surprise, for it is the void that we have run from in horror, moving all the while against that which proffers consolation, against kinship and union with the earthy world. In the void as Abrams observes, "no part ...

⁴³ See Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996). Josephine Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime: The Story of Prehistoric Australia and its People* (Pymble, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1995). Sylvia O'Meara and Douglas A. West, eds., *From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous Peoples* (Toronto, ON: Garamond Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Griffiths, *Pip Pip*, 14.

can be created or destroyed, and no part can be distinguished from any other part.”⁴⁵ This signifies the state of non-being (death), for a living person like a living culture must be capable of being both created and destroyed.⁴⁶ Yet the void here also signifies the death of subjectivity, the loss of *knowing of* being. For insofar as no part is distinguishable from any other part one is unable to know ‘one-self’ as separate, as definable from anything else, one cannot in fact know that one exists. In the anonymous abyss and its geo-physical counterparts, is the dissolution of self in life, where the self is confirmed of its insignificance in the yawning face of an indifferent, abstract and unknowable cosmos. In the emptiness of time and emptiness of place, divested of relationship, diversity, unpredictability – there comes the driving need to fill this space, to consume. In such emptiness the hungry, voracious self roams, seeking to become real, substantial, present.

To suggest we are approaching the void is not to say something about the universe. It is not to suggest that the universe was once caring and is no more. Rather it is to suggest that caring and meaning cannot be understood in universal terms but need particularity and place. Reality as Borgmann observes needs its proper scale.⁴⁷ Without such we are left in the face of an increasingly undifferentiated cosmos, nowhere in particular, as no one in particular. This is the ‘reality’ against which we shrink and falter, the reality against which we seek proof. And it is in this search that we destroy the very places and creatures where knowing, where being, where self can be located. Tragically the destruction of the earth is now implicated in the functioning of our epistemological system, for it is by such destruction – and the idea that we remain all the while intact, – that our human being is finally established. If the earth is not fit for human life, it is not therefore, our place of belonging, our home.

The emptying of the self is due then not only to processes of externalisation that remove as it were interiority but is also a reflection and reinforcement of the emptying

⁴⁵ Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 200.

⁴⁶ In this respect the state of western culture, in its inflexibility, rigidity and increasing lack of receptiveness to difference, is I would suggest not a living culture but one approaching the state of death and one that fosters and facilitates Guattari’s ‘deathly repetition’ as the primary cultural experience. Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), 39.

⁴⁷ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. In an insightful analogy Borgmann compares the distortion of the meaning of everyday life when considered with a macro lens, to that of looking at a painting through a microscope or from a satellite. In both cases the ‘painting’ would effectively disappear, likewise reality, sense and meaning disintegrate when the perspective one takes is too large or too small.

of time and place. The self, existing in relation to these states and the forms they take, both bears and engenders the consequence of their transformation. The empty self is necessarily voracious. Consumption in this setting functions as an attempt to re-build context and to rebuild a self. Of particular importance here is the way in which the nature of consumables and the nature of consumption as a process has come to shape the nature of the human. In the pathology of consumption the qualities that characterise the consumable, discontinuity from time and place, homogeneity in purpose, transferability, fixedness in form, disposability and impermeability – not subject to wilful change, a certified product, have come to characterise the consumer. The modern consumer is one who is increasingly disconnected from place, from natural and historical time and from any particular place or time. Being everywhere at once s/he at the same time is nowhere at all – seemingly omnipresent s/he fails to be present to the changing, living, finite world. Increasingly fixed to the role of consumer the modern self is impermeable to the pulsing, animate world and other modes of being. Consequently what is cultivated and reflected in the society at large are those aspects of the self that can be fixed, transferred reproduced and disposed of, those aspects of the self that can be made over into object, not prone to change and if so desired could be ‘held’ forever.

The Next Baseline Shift – Constructing the Impermeable Self

A transition has thus occurred where consumption once one mode of experiencing the world, has now become *the* mode of experience, within which experience itself is a consumable. Where consumption is the primary mode of being human, available to the late-modern self, (including ‘green’ consumption) all experiences, things, states, become points of consumption. This is analogous to the way in which religion, when it was the primary vehicle through which human being was established, collected all acts, experiences and states, under the measure and management of God. Thus in the current setting life is reduced in all its facets to those elements and dimensions that meet the criteria of the consumable object, translating the sacred into the profane, the pedagogical into the product and the philosophical into the technical. Thus we see the search for spirituality conducted through the collection of iconography, through gold crosses, incense, dream webs, dot paintings and assembly line Buddha’s. Nuanced, particularized, patient, trusting relationship with the other is no longer the primary pathway to such experience. Education is increasingly becoming a vicarious and

performative pursuit, indeed a business reliant on students as clients or consumers and as Hougan relates the very space for lateral thinking has been swept away in the flurry for closure:

Like most other activities, thinking has become the province of technicians. And since the business of technicians is the rationalization of means, contemporary philosophy is devoted largely to the analysis of its own methods and the ways in which it gets work done. The answers which it seeks are critical solutions to methodological problems, preferably ones which have industrial applications ... problems of epistemology and consciousness are no longer subjects of ethereal speculation, but technical conundrums whose solutions are essential to the development of ... Next Generational computers.⁴⁸

In the shift from the self as consumer to the self as consumable, the self has likewise become a nexus of production and reproduction. In this production and reproduction is the record and in the record is proof.

Taking place in practises such as the now normalized, albeit pathological, process of videoing any and every moment is the act of objectifying and thus consuming experience and in this collating and constructing material evidence of a self. As Grindstaff observes (without however theorising past this observation), “the possibility of being on camera is considered seductive because self-exhibition is a validation of existence.”⁴⁹ Yet in the very act of so doing, context is lost and the space for subjectivity, for self-hood is further diminished. In recording, for example the moment of birth or marriage, the recording both literally and metaphorically stands in the way of being present to the experience. Neither the recorded nor the recorder can be within the experience, for both are engaged in a however momentary staging of the experience. In such both partake in the process of objectification and in so doing break the spell of the sensuous. In filming a wedding for instance, neither the bride and groom – nor the friend, relative or hired hand – are in the givenness of the now rather each is poised to capture the record of the constructed moment. As such they are attending to the background, the light, the stance, the smiles, the pose and are necessarily disengaged from the unfolding of unconstructed time and unconstructed place. They are, as it were, centre stage to the scenery of a wedding.

⁴⁸ Hougan, *Decadence*, 51.

⁴⁹ Laura Grindstaff, “Trashy or Transgressive? ‘Reality TV’ and the Politics of Social Control,” *Thresholds: Viewing Culture* 9 (1995), <http://nideffer.net/proj/Tvc/section3/11.Tvc.v9.sect3.Grindstaff.html>.

Neither does the record only stand in the way of the experience but as the spectacle of the Great Ocean Road testifies, the record increasingly *becomes* the experience. Rather than capturing the moment the camera has come to claim the moment, and the uncaptured moment fails to exist. In this the experience collected, collated and held, makes other forms of remembering and other forms of knowing invisible and hence redundant. Compounding this, is the fact that subjective memory held in other forms is culturally rendered unreliable, uncertain and invalid. The proof is in the record.

Where the urge to record was once reserved for significant occasions, it is now becoming the measure of every moment, for to know a moment, to know life as an accretion of moments, is to have it on record. We now know ourselves, or rather seek but fail to know ourselves, as reflected in the object and this means at a cultural level the qualities that we covet and value are primarily those qualities of the self and those kinds of (celebrated) selves that can be, and are, materially represented and reproduced. What is central here is not the particular context, location of time and place – the beach, the party, the Himalayas – but the repeated content (‘me’) and the reflective and reproductive capacity itself. Within this exchange what is passing (the subject) is taken for what is fixed (the object) and the ‘other’ (organic life) that is known as passing and finite is, literally, backgrounded and devalued for this very reason.

It is no accident that social media sites have proliferated in response to this trend with every banal detail of any and every moment being recorded, tweeted, blogged, snapped. This is through sites, such as the not accidentally named *face-book* – the story of the face, *my-space*, *you-tube*, twitter, flicker, *my life*, sites which in capturing and freezing for eternity ephemeral moments, thoughts, images, tweets, blogs, posts offer the illusion of permanence, of certainty, of identity and – for what it’s worth provide visual permanence. One’s facebook profile persists after one is dead.

Significantly however this quest for proof depends not only on the collation of visual snapshots of one’s life, with the hoped for continuity that such documentation provides – fruitless as this is, for the very nature of the object is that it is discontinuous with and suggests a freedom from time and place – but this quest also revealingly depends on the public distribution of these images. These productions of the self to produce proof of self, need to be seen, importantly they need to be consumed. The self, the subject, must for all epistemological intents and purposes, become object.

Within this logic, the more one is viewed, both by the equally faceless public and by the self, the more one, within modern epistemological definitions, exists. A quantitative difference has led to a qualitative distinction. Unsurprisingly therefore celebrity, the celebrated 'seen' self, is in our culture the yearned for state. This is not fame for any particular talent, skill or virtue, for inventing a life-saving device, for being a consummate actor, for striving towards world peace. It is celebrity for celebrity's sake. The goal is simply to be known and be seen by millions. The vacuity of the everyday, the widespread nothingness to which celebrity offers relief has been increasingly documented. Arthur Miller, writes in *Timebends: A Life* that, "it was not so much death I feared as insignificance,"⁵⁰ mirroring the sentiment that where alternative modes of knowing have dissolved, a life unknown, is a life without significance. Likewise Berman in his study of disenchantment, cites Dr Darold Treffert's observation, that millions of children and young adults are today tormented by a, "gnawing emptiness or meaninglessness expressed not as a fear of what may happen to them, but rather as a fear that nothing will happen to them."⁵¹ Existing in logical and epistemological relationship to the fear of anonymity the production of the celebrity accelerates. This is apparent in the increasing obsession with celebrity's lives and the glut of reality TV programs, which offer to the 'anyman' the allure of becoming real. And indeed any and every 'man' is in on it. As Grindstaff, writing in 2007, observes:

One in every six American families now owns a camcorder, and, as the critics observe, it seems as if all of them want their tapes on television. The producers of America's Funniest Home Videos receive more than 2000 tapes each day and local news stations have begun flashing video hotline numbers at the end of their newscasts.⁵²

Elaborating on this in reference to reality t.v in particular, Grindstaff notes the way guests willingly partake in their own degradation so long as it gives them the 'promise, however brief, of celebrity exposure'. Here, Kurt Anderson agrees, commenting that:

These days it has become standard for all sorts of people to flaunt not just their physical oddities but their stupidity, vulgarity, or sinfulness as well. ... They

⁵⁰ Arthur Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 69.

⁵¹ Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 27.

⁵² Grindstaff, *Trashy or Transgressive?*, <http://nideffer.net/proj/Tvc/section3/11.Tvc.v9.sect3.Grindstaff.html>.

volunteer, in exchange for attention or a few bucks, to suffer sneers and outright ridicule, so long as the medium is sufficiently mass.⁵³

Emphasised in reality TV and celebrity worship is then not the talent, craft, and definitely not the individuality of these people, where this exists, but the status of being 'seen'. As Ian Buchanan observes what the 'star' of reality t.v seems to be enjoying is, "something inaccessible to us, they are enjoying being looked at."⁵⁴

However what the celebrity is celebrated for - climbing out of the mass of anonymity and reaching, however temporarily, the state of being knowable and known - is not that which sets them apart from our own reality, but firmly within it. Consequently the increasingly searched for and reported on details of the celebrity are the dating/ dieting/ hairstyle, lifestyle changes, the everyday trivia of their lives. Likewise, in the staged dramas of reality t.v, it is the 'drama' of the everyday that is screened, moments of eating, fighting, having sex, even the monotony of doing nothing. The only factor that excludes such figures from the anonymous mass is that they are seen and they are thus known. Yet the fame of celebrity is a consumer pursuit, one object, of admiration, beauty, intrigue, is quickly ingested and passed over for another. The quest then is to continue to be a desirable, eternal object, to maintain worthwhile viewing.

While it could be argued that celebrity culture is a continuation of the age old tradition of hero worship, this new cult indicates a cultural shift markedly different from hero worship of former times. Today's celebrities are not celebrated for their moral fibre, prowess, performance or any other exceptional quality but because they are seen to be an object fit for celebration. Another distinction from historical celebrity, where the cause for adulation was a particular quality of a particular person, modern celebrity advances the idea, and social media sites and reality t.v perpetuate the idea, that visibility is available to anyone. However the visibility of the celebrity is precisely that which cannot be available to everyone for it depends on and feeds off the anonymity of the invisible, unknown mass. To have identity is to step out of the unseen, unknown multitude and become one of the seen, known few. What thus confers knownness and attributes reality to the celebrated is the spectators, not the spectacle. The irony herein is

⁵³ Kurt Anderson, quoted in Grindstaff, *Trashy or Transgressive?*, <http://nideffer.net/proj/Tvc/section3/11.Tvc.v9.sect3.Grindstaff.html>.

⁵⁴ Ian Buchanan, "Enjoying 'Reality TV'," *Australian Humanities Review* 22 (2001): 1-8, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-June-2001/buchanan3.html>.

that the lives and lounge rooms of the spectators is an empty space that no one is interested in watching. Indeed the only compelling aspect of the screened lives and screened reality is that it *is* watched. It is the watching that transforms the mundane into the watchable at the same time that it renders mute and invisible those that watch. Everyday reality is diminished and de-participated in by passive participation in reflections of a virtual reality in the same way that the everyday person is diminished by the obsessive preoccupation with the lives of the celebrated few. This pseudo-reality, as Nicholls writes, exists in the space of a non-world:

The ebb and flow of detached consumption, distracted viewing, and episodic amazement exists in a time and space outside history, outside the realm in which physical, bodily engagement marks our existential commitment to a project and its realization.⁵⁵

Nicholls, in speaking of the idea of a project, is referring to Sartre's idea of an 'engaged and committed life in the world'. In this context all experience has significance because each experience is part of this real world. Yet it is this very significance, and membership to a given and embracing context, that reality t.v denies. In such, reality t.v "plays a complex game, It keeps reality at bay."⁵⁶ Indeed the virtual is key to its appeal. As Elizabeth Seaton wryly concurs, "the virtue of virtual reality is that no one really lives there."⁵⁷

Clearly then, celebrity rather than facilitating processes of identity construction for the '*anyman*,' requires, creates and feeds off the ever enlarging constituency of the unknown and increasingly unknowable mass. At the same time, the everyday person is ever more situated in unknowable, abstract, homogenous space – in the void of non-place. The construction of non-place is itself necessary, both for the celebrity, and the self as object, for to be a product one must be accessible to any and every one and hence discontinuous from particular place and particular time.

Dis-embedded, unknown to others and unknown to oneself, the late modern self fails to exist. Thus, in our successful, and for most, convincing, remodelling of the world, we see material evidence of control, separation, fragmentation, fixity, impermeability all

⁵⁵ Nicholls, *Blurred Boundaries*, 53.

⁵⁶ Nicholls, *Blurred Boundaries*, x.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Seaton, "Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1999), <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1103/1009>.

around us, forgetting in the process that we ‘become what we behold.’ And what we behold is not human, not animate and not, in fact, proof.

What we are experiencing therefore is the formation of a culture that cannot sustain subjectivity. Lacking subjectivity we come to rely on the development of a particularly different form of human being, an impermeable self, one that in the lure of becoming object, becoming permanent, placeless, timeless, omnipresent and eternal, is locked in a closed, purely self-referential system. The impermeable self indicates a shift away from the reflection and representation of the self in product (consumption theory) to the self *becoming* product.⁵⁸ In this shift the self, or rather the construction of self that stands in for self, takes on the qualities of the product (permanence, certainty, rigidity, impermeability) it seeks identity in.

With the emergence of the impermeable self, there is a further shift in the baseline of what it is to be human. In this shift subjectivity is radically diminished and the self, the subject, is slowly but inexorably becoming object. Within this system we can ‘know’ that the earth, the other and ‘we’ are in trouble but can really do nothing about it. For our very ways of knowing through which we mediate the world are locked in the closed space of the self, relying on and fostering a radical disconnection from all that is not self. And further within this same world the self is all that is seen to exist. As a result what we are increasingly witnessing, is that regard for, indeed consciousness of, the rest of the world, is slipping, completely, away.

⁵⁸ The impermeable self is a concept I have developed to capture the shift in the baseline of human experience in late modernity, one which moves from a self, capable of connection, relationship, continuity in time, to one that is fixed, impervious to change, relationship or connection, one that devours experience, and is incapable of truly letting the world, as *other*, in.

Chapter Five

Solution or Dissolution? The Construction of Self in Late Modernity

The argument of this thesis is that, rather than being distinct phenomena, ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity are deeply implicated, they pivot on the same ontological axis. It may, at first, appear surprising that ecological destruction remains largely unaddressed within cultural theory. However, in this lapse is the presumption that the state of the planet is something with which environmentalists, scientists, technicians, policy and planning officers are concerned. It is not a question of, or a problem for, 'culture', in its distilled form, but is a problem that belongs to ecology. This mirrors the same absence of dialogue concerning the loss of subjectivity within environmental discourse.

Dealing with these phenomena in isolation presents serious problems, ones which ultimately reinforce the very conditions by which they have emerged, (fragmentation and hyper-separation being two of these). Chapters Two and Three examined the limitations of the 'ecology only' discourse in redressing the formative logic and the cultural deformations that produce ecological and self distortion. Chapter Four analysed what I name as the search for proof and the making of the impermeable self. It looked at the way in which this search (and this kind of self), emerges from alienation from the other-than-human world. This chapter examines the 'culture only' discourse insofar as it responds to and comments on the loss of subjectivity in late modernity. I argue that while much of this discourse is deeply insightful, the failure to identify the natural world, not as a backdrop for social action, but as a core constituent of human being, results in circuitous and culturally reproductive outcomes.

To discuss cultural theory is to welcome numerous theorists to the table. While many theorists have proffered, and continue to proffer, valuable insights into the cultural changes that have ensued in the preceding centuries and in contemporary times, the focus of this chapter is restricted to those who both diagnose and describe the *crisis of subjectivity* in late modernity. Our group then suddenly becomes smaller. It shrinks even further when confined to those who make some attempt to consider the natural world in the making of the social and the making of the subject. Here I consider those who I feel ‘capture’ the late modern scene most completely, drawing attention to the seminal elements that warp day to day life. While inevitably I will have left out someone’s original and compelling contribution I hope that the selection I have made and the pattern of thinking and critique it represents suffice for the purposes and the clarity of my analysis. What I wish to draw attention to above all is not the particular details of any one theorist’s thought (though these are both valuable and important) but what is a tendency, a pattern, within cultural theory itself. The fact therefore that those who are *least* likely to express this tendency still do reveals something subterranean.

My suggestion is, that this tendency and pattern, is no accident as it is one that derives from the very foundations of the culture to which such theory speaks – namely the tendency to marginalise and render insignificant the ecological and the material in any analysis of the social and any analysis of the self. A further consequence of this is the misrepresentation of the current nature of the ethical and its power (or lack of) to execute change. The emphasis in this theory is on a despairing, anxious and crisis-ridden self, who, while inhabiting a fragmented, distorted and dying world, is nonetheless still ‘intact’. The notion that this integrity, this wholeness, can pertain in a fragmented, distorted and dying world carries the problematic assumption that the self is fundamentally *separate* from the world. This allows for the assumption that, in this separation, the ‘moral self’ (while misled, distracted, and compromised) nonetheless remains fundamentally whole and can be sufficiently retrieved and relied upon to initiate change. To imply that the self is separate from the other-than-human and the humanly composed world is, I suggest, to make a fundamental ontological error and this lies at the heart of the current crises. Insofar as this is the case, the moral self, suffers the same fate as the ‘self’, not merely distraction and confusion but dissolution.

The key theorists I have selected for the exploration of this terrain are, Albert Borgmann, Zygmunt Bauman and Kenneth Gergen. All three testify to the current era

as being one of late, liquid or advanced modernity. They all therefore believe that the place we are in is, in fundamental, structural respects not entirely different from the period named and known as modernity. This is quite a different perspective from those theorists who interpret the cultural landscape as one where modernity has been exposed, decried, essentially discarded and superseded. The group committed to this latter perspective are loosely known as the post modernists. Such thinkers, do not consider the self to be in crisis. To the contrary they write as though current conditions warrant celebration. Loosely allied with the post-modernists are the post-structuralists, authors such as Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida who argue against the meta-narratives typical of modernist theory in favour of a more contingent and fluid interpretation of history and society. While neither group will be included in the core analysis of this chapter the way in which they exacerbate given conditions of hyper-separation and solipsism, in both facilitating a pathological relativism and in sustaining the excision of the ecological from epistemological, ontological and ethical questions, and the way they have helped therefore to stage the setting that my chosen theorists critique, bears some consideration.

The Post-modern, Post-structuralist Intervention

While post modernism and post structuralism overlap and interpenetrate each other I will here for arguments sake draw a line between the *aesthetic* relativism to which post modernism gives shape and the *ethical* and *epistemological* relativism that post structuralism validates. Taken together, post-modernism and post-structuralism maroon the already unanchored self and in the process establish that there is no safe shore to return to. It is to this lost, anxious, forlorn self that Borgmann, Bauman and Gergen speak.

Cahoone traces, the first use of the term, 'postmodern' to the German philosopher, Rudolf Pannwitz, who in 1917, used it to describe the nihilism of western culture.¹ Some twenty years later the term postmodernism was employed by Frederic de Onis to highlight a reaction against the *cultural* movement of modernism.² According to Cahoone, this was primarily an assault on the literary forms of modernism, where

¹ Lawrence Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 3.

² Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 7, Cahoone, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*.

literary modernism was itself a movement that was a reaction to the forms and assumptions implicit in modernity. However it was not until the literary movement against aesthetic modernism in the 1950s and the following cultural movements in painting, music, architecture, theatre and film in the 1960s and 1970s, that these trends developed into the *movement* we now call postmodernism. This movement, Featherstone points out, did not position itself as the temporal consequent of modernism. Rather it sought to define itself in opposition to the time, traits and thinking of modernism and modernity. Its rhetoric and its tone were revolutionary in nature, the faultiness of the old order jubilantly declared and the alternative salve of postmodernism offered in its wake. The alternative it offered was a multiple, undefined, unpredictable, unclassifiable and above all uncertain reality. It was anti-modern. This was achieved through the subversion of accepted techniques, styles and associations whose displacement challenged the notions of order/ certainty/ linear narrative/ structure and truth that were taken as somewhat immutable givens in the canons of modernity, (a challenge which post-structuralism expanded). The literature, art and architecture of the 1960s and 1970s turned such constructs on their head, revealing in the process their ‘constructed’ nature. Within artistic and literary genres this movement reinvented processes of relation and inter-relation, creativity, expression and interaction. The post-modern character born from such developments was one of hybridity, spontaneity, pastiche style combinations and fluid movement between genres.

What came to be the detached, cavalier yet curious style of being post-modern neatly fitted into and attenuated the advanced capitalist framework, a framework that manufactured desire for change as much as it manufactured ‘consumables’. In time technologies evolved to further interpret and reinforce the exchangeable reality that post modernism promoted.³ Key to the creation of the unattached, collage style mode of being was the breaking down of the distinctions between high art and low art and the emergence into the artistic sphere of pop culture. Warhol’s much celebrated subversion

³ The most prominent technology in this regard is of course the internet, with its modus operandi of commitment free browsing and the social media it makes available by which people can incessantly narrate and reinvent their world. Hamilton describes the internet as the “epitome of the post-modern attitude to truth ... the text of post-modernism *par excellence*”, facilitating a mass, uncensored participation in the construction of truth it interprets and delivers the boundary-less relativism of the post-modern mindset. Clive Hamilton, *Clive Hamilton; “Reclaiming Morality from Conservative Dogma and Post-Modern Indifference,”* <http://clivehamilton.com/reclaiming-morality-from-conservative-dogma-and-post-modern-indifference/> (last modified August 12, 2008).

and re-creation of that which was known and traded as art is key to this transition and the authentication of popular culture. This celebration of popular culture alongside the dethroning of high culture, implied the dissolution of the latter as the arbiter of value and the related imposition of any and every individual in this role. Evaluations of the good, as they pertained to all forms of creative and public expression became simply a matter of personal taste, accordingly, what now ‘counted’ as culture was a matter of personal interpretation rather than public authority. The influence these changes would have on the retreat into the (self-constructed) self, in concert with other social and ecological developments, is not to be underestimated. Here post modernism harnessed and ran with a certain ‘temper’, and in the process further advanced changes in the self and the social that were already in the making, while post structuralism, in posing a theoretical challenge to the philosophical foundations of our culture, authorised the self as the centre of all value.

Post-structuralism and Place – A Preview

Post-structuralism is a term used to group together the thought of key French theorists of the 1960s and 1970s. Chief amongst these are Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva and Jean Francois Lyotard. Post-structuralism sought to undermine all meta-narratives, the idea that any one story, be it - God, capitalism, linguistics, could explain and account for social and political reality. In this respect it was a reaction to structuralism and the meta-narratives contained in the social, particularly Marxist, and linguistic theories of the time. For these theorists ‘truth’ was not to be found in rational argument rather each epoch and more specifically each ‘site,’ perpetuates its own truth, discursively constructed.⁴ Interesting to observe here is the historical period within which these theorists were writing and their response to this historicity. The period within which post-structuralists and post-modernists were developing theory was one in which the weight of the Holocaust hung heavily over a depleted and disillusioned Europe. The Holocaust’s details and incomprehensible horrors were becoming in the 1960s and 70s widely available to the European public. But on this particularly alarming atrocity these theorists remained silent. This silence is at once surprising and revealing. It is surprising insofar as the theorists who attempt to

⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1970).

mine the foundations of western thinking can leave unremarked one of the most profound, and for their time, recent distortions of human behaviour the world has witnessed. Such silence draws attention to some of the assumptions within which their theory is embedded, assumptions which produce a parallel silence regarding ecological devastation. Given that the breathing world is under serious and increasing threat, and that Europe was, in their time, cloaked in post-holocaust disillusionment, and that neither of these are seen as pivotal to social and cultural theory, indicates the extent to which post-modernism and post-structuralism are able to divorce their considerations from the most pressing issues facing the planet and with it the implications for the self in those conditions. In such dismissal the self recedes further and further from the flesh of life. This lapse is explainable insofar as the type of self to which the post-structuralists refer is, in important respects, a disembodied, ethereal self. It exists between conceptual spaces and remains unaffected by not only a post-holocaust despair but by the linked despair suffusing a post-enlightenment world, where hope, direction, trust and certainty have diminished, where the future no longer compels. In this the relation between the self and the world is made redundant, since the capacity to perceive and comment on this relationship is severely diminished.⁵

It must be noted however that one of the most well-known and influential post-structuralists, Michel Foucault, included with the death of truth, knowledge and certainty, the death of the humanist self. In this, he seems to reference the effect of world dissolution on the self. Yet in this death the sole alternative remains a return to the same such self as the point by which both awareness of oppression and techniques of subversion can be enacted. This is not however to imply that Foucault's self was in any sense constant or essential. The self which has died is the sense of the 'core' self that persists through time. In its place is a discontinuous self, with no essence. It is a self that is constantly being re-made according to changing currents and events.⁶ The point here is that his insights, alongside Derrida's, Deleuze and Guattari's, amidst others, deconstruction of traditional notions of truth, knowledge, and reality, bear the social

⁵ There is a parallel here with the emergence of the Romantic sensibility and its turn to the self following the assault of industrialisation and the bloodshed and moral chaos of the French Revolution. Again the regimes of power and influence could no longer be seen as purveyors of knowledge, of truth, the good or the right. However the Romantics made an explicit case against the disenchantment of the world wrought by social and political changes whereas the post-structuralists, expressed not disappointment, dismay or sorrow but simply focused on the discursive construction of truth, knowledge and the good life.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

consequence of legitimating an epistemological turn to the self as the only viable position, making in turn the micro-narrative of the self the only viable story, (a phenomena which has had exponential consequences, as I have recounted, in the age of Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and the cultural pilgrimages to reality t.v).

In presenting knowledge, truth and morality to be (essentially hollow), discursive constructs,⁷ invested in narratives that are geared towards ordering, shaping and controlling our world, post-structuralists undermine any position from which any such self determined truth or morality can be critiqued. There is no reliable authority against which knowledge claims and questions of value, of morality, can be tested, none that at least cannot be deconstructed in terms of their own internal logic. While the post-structuralists launched a convincing argument against the regimes of truth, knowledge and morality on their own terms, and while I agree with many of their insights, I do not agree with the foundations of their premises. I concur that the ‘hollow’ nature of our dominant narratives exists, not *simply* because they are constructed in ways that are self-reproducing of specific power and knowledge relations, but because they cast the ecological and the material outside of their narrative. In this regard I maintain that truth, knowledge and the good are not individually constructed but are coherent to the extent that they are the unfixed, fluid and emergent properties of deep, abiding relationship with the other-than-human and the organic human world.

The post-modernist’s project of returning the seat of all value to the individual, a project that began with aesthetic value and with the dissolution of the ethical gradually morphed into all value, and the post-structuralists denial of the legitimacy of any claims to shared truth, value and meaning, together reinforce the cultural logic that excises the ecological and the material from processes of self (and social) constitution. Such excision backgrounds the physical objects, centres and structures of modernity both in their power to order and shape human experience and in their dominance over natural systems. The cultural repercussions of post-modernism, in particular, have been the collective endorsement of the free floating, (chameleonesque) responsibility free,

⁷ Hamilton contends that, “so overwhelming were the criticisms of the old [1950’s and before] moral order that a generation – led by new thinkers like Foucault and Derrida who took it upon themselves to challenge everything – rejected not just particular moral rules but morality as such. If so much of the traditional ethical code could be shown to be an arbitrary instrument of oppression, perhaps the whole code was tainted and all ethical rules must be invalid.” Hamilton, “Reclaiming Morality from Conservative Dogma and Post-Modern Indifference,” <http://clivehamilton.com/reclaiming-morality-from-conservative-dogma-and-post-modern-indifference/>.

subjectively determined and endlessly reinvented, late modern self. If truth does not exist, if the good can really not be known or located, if nothing is certain and all is a potentially vested cultural production then what is the self to do but to please herself, in all she thinks, believes and does? This is particularly so when the core activity of what she does is to obsess over the way she reflects and re-presents her ever-changing self. The only catch is that this self is rarely in fact pleased, rarely satisfied in what she believes in, knows and does. Rather it is despair, disillusionment and anxiety that came to characterise this self. This self is in crisis.

Late Modernity and its Surveyors

Now, in the twenty-first century, postmodern and post-modernism as terms and concepts are, outside of academic circles, rarely mentioned. In his second edition of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Featherstone claims that:

...the stock of consumer culture has risen and postmodernism has fallen ... postmodernism, has dropped out of site and is no longer a fashionable term, indeed for many it is decidedly *démodé*.⁸

This is not however the case for post-*modernity*, a term used to characterise the cultural climate within which we are said to live today. Alternative descriptions of this period mark an important point of theoretical divergence. Those like myself, and the cultural theorists to be discussed, who describe this period as late, liquid, advanced or post modernity do so in the belief that what has occurred, rather than a shift in epochs, is a reinforcement of modernity's premises and core machinery.⁹ While I argue that there is a threshold change emerging this change is not 'epochal' in nature, it derives rather from the climax of a sustained cultural logic, one which populates pre-modernity, modernity and late modernity. What characterises late modernity in this view is not the demise of modernity but a discernible shift in cultural temperament, mood and self-world orientation. The theorists who take this view all describe this condition as one that challenges the formerly reliable, consistent and reassuring frameworks of selfhood.

⁸ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, xiv.

⁹ Anthony Giddens likewise argues that, "rather than entering a period of post-modernity we are moving into one in which the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before." Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 3.

There is the sense that we now live in an unstable world where the self is in an unstable condition. Against the perception then that we are confronted by an ecological crisis but the self is otherwise intact, they argue (without in main theorising the ecological crisis) that the self is not, in fact, intact. Further they suggest that the measures employed to assess individual and collective wellbeing conceal as much as they reveal and are not accurate or incisive indicators of the subterranean field of human emotion and motivation.

The theorists, Zygmunt Bauman, Albert Borgmann and Kenneth Gergen, take their place within a wider discourse that includes Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, Marshall McLuhan, Mike Featherstone, Jurgen Habermas, Antony Giddens and Charles Taylor among others. However, as fore-stated, I have chosen these theorists for the way in which they are broadly representative of this vein of thought and the way in which they diagnose the crisis of the self in late modernity, diagnoses that are particularly close in important respects, and distinct in others, to my argument. These theorists write at the intersection of culture and the self, and it is this intersection and its silenced other – place in which I am particularly interested. This meeting point, whose boundaries overlap, inter-penetrate and variously populate the social, the personal, the textual, the technological and the three dimensional forms of the urban is one that the theorists who detail the ‘ecological crisis’ fail to examine. Such an oversight means they fail to explicate the full spectrum of the crisis in which they are interested, for one cannot identify the distortions of our world, and our relationship to this world, until one can identify the distortions of the self within it.

Key to all three theorist’s understanding is the perception that the times we live in are not characterised by optimism or hope but are characterised by a kind of despair. To diagnose despair, as a cultural phenomenon, in a culture that is comprised of individual hyper-separated selves, is no small task. Within the culture at large despair has a range of manifestations including depression, drug addiction, alcoholism, obesity, vandalism, over-work. Most of these forms are subject to expert scrutiny and expert management.¹⁰ However, in such, they are scrutinised as separate phenomena, and are not seen to be related to ecological conditions, and are certainly not seen to be the outcome of a

¹⁰ This is not to suggest that all these conditions in every instance are caused singularly by a culturally infused despair but rather that cultural dysfunction is a mediating factor in personal dysfunction, it embraces subsequent causes.

culture of despair. To identify a diffuse, cloudlike despair in a culture reluctant to admit its existence, is to identify that its form often does not look like despair as mediated by an individual person. It may look like the described conditions yet it can also include behaviour that presents as the inverse of despair, active states that include hyper-activity, consumption, self-reproduction, ambition, over-production and resentment. What accretes at the collective, subterranean level has varying effects at the level of the particular. To check the cultural pulse therefore one needs to observe the connections, patterns, relations and syntheses between otherwise ostensibly unrelated structures, events, and behaviours. From this perspective the quest to be known, as discussed in Chapter Four, is not a successful act of person-shaping inasmuch as it is a somewhat desperate search for proof of personhood.

On Borgmann and the Sullen Self

In *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* Albert Borgmann suggests this despair and the superficially incongruent behaviours that demonstrate it partake in a distorted reality. Arguing towards a 'postmodern realism' he suggests that what we, as postmodern consumers, currently experience is a reality that has lost its proper scale.¹¹ As noted in Chapter Four, this loss of scale reflects both a distortion in perception and a distortion in experience.

Any credible view of reality must be consistent with the cosmological and microphysical conditions so far uncovered by physics. But the reality that finally matters lies between the physical micro scale and macro scale. It must be granted its proper scale like a painting that would vanish as such if viewed through a microscope or from a satellite.¹²

In the same way that microscopic and macroscopic lenses give information but warp our perspective so too does the lens of hyperreality through which we view the late modern world provide information but in the process distort such information.

¹¹ David Malouf, in his discussion of the changing discourse of happiness, makes a similar point, suggesting that the 'problem' of technologies is not "a question of whether our mind can accommodate itself to new ways of seeing, to new technologies and realities that are abstract or virtual – clearly it can – but whether emotionally, psychologically, we can feel at home in a world whose dimensions so largely exceed, both in terms of the infinitely great and the infinitely small, what our bodies can keep in view." David Malouf, *The Happy Life: The Search for Contentment in the Modern World*, Quarterly Essay 41 (Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc., 2011), 22.

¹² Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 118.

Hyperreality is reality clarified, distilled, rid of all contingency, and undesired interruptions. Hyperreality is brilliant, rich, dramatic in sensory contrasts but less dramatic in 'reality.' It is screened, safe, contained. It is also pliable, entirely subject to personal desires and manipulation. Hyperreality is the world of hyperreal glamour.¹³ It is the world of the commodity and of commodious individualism. It is a disposable, discontinuous world that relies on and promotes erasure from the ethical demands and connections to place and community. As Borgmann notes:

To be disposable, hyperreality must be experientially discontinuous with its context. If it were deeply rooted in its setting, it would take laborious and protracted effort to deracinate and replace it. Reality encumbers and confines. Disposability and discontinuity are marks of hyperreal glamour, and glamour in turn is the sign of the perfect commodity.¹⁴

Not only does hyperreality free the individual from any one setting, it also cultivates the illusion that hyperreality itself is free from dependence on mechanical, industrial and geo-physical systems. Here Borgmann contrasts the current epoch, with the industrial age of mid to late modernity, where the raw means to sophisticated ends were visible, noisy, polluting and generally obtrusive. In contrast to this, the technological operations that produce hyperreality are for the most part completely hidden from view. And given that the visual is the primary mode of experiencing this reality their visual absence suggests a physical absence. Building on this perspective we can see that the 'invisibility' of these connections and their concealment (one that incidentally is in distinct contrast to the exposition of technique, structure and machinery that characterised the modernist Bauhaus art movement and subsequent interpretations) rids hyperreality's overseers and its participating members of any responsibility for the 'reality' that is sacrificed to make hyperreality possible, taking them glamorously away from the messy, imperfect, confronting equations of life.

When the life of regular reality is returned to it is met with, what Borgmann describes as, an attitude of sullen resentment. This is because, the cumbersome, confined, limited and demanding contours of reality are an unwanted contrast to the shiny, immediately gratifying, responsibility-free contours of hyperreality. Regular reality when positioned against hyperreality, appears inferior, dull, backward and restraining:

¹³ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 87.

¹⁴ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 96.

...it is typically a resentful and defeated return, resentful because reality compares so poorly with hyperreal glamour ... defeated because reality with all its poverty inescapably asserts its claims on us.¹⁵

Consequently, where possible, reality is avoided, diminished and discarded. In its place hyperreality emerges all the more omnipotent and alluring. The post-modern self is thus faced with the seemingly irreconcilable post-modern *divide* between the pull of hyperreality and the push of a pedestrian, grinding, regular 'reality.' Borgmann believes that, as things stand, hyperreality is likely to win out with the hyperreal overlay choking "off the underlying reality and [reducing] it entirely to a mechanical and marginal condition,"¹⁶ much like an out of control weed dominates an ecological system that is out of balance. He suggests, however, that what can help avert this outcome is the cultivation of postmodern realism. Postmodern realism is not anti-technological, it accepts and in part celebrates the role of technology in modern life. Borgmann concedes that "technology's provisions have become central to human life and it would be wrong to wish them away."¹⁷ While accepting the techniques of late modern life post-modern realism also embraces the world of 'eloquent things.' Borgmann suggests that the world of eloquent things was one that was accessible on a daily basis prior to the rise of Enlightenment science, Lockean liberalism and capitalist values. It was the Gilbert White world where, tradition, community, place and person existed in comfortable symbiosis. While Borgmann does not elaborate on this, it needs to be remembered that this was also a world where ethics and epistemology were found in the inter-relations between person, place and the theological order. Knowledge in this setting was ultimately referenced to knowing God and by association his way and his works. To know of his way and his works was to know of the good and to thus cast one's worldly pursuits into a purposeful context. Borgmann does not imagine that the pre-Enlightenment world could, or should, be returned to but argues that a world that extols the qualities of eloquent things can still be realised.

The world of post-modern realism, he argues, can be found by the practice of patient vigour, focal realism and celebration, all of which puts one in touch with the world of eloquent things. In this state one can bridge the divide that breaks reality into two dysfunctional halves – that of hyperreality and a comparatively diminished regular

¹⁵ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 96.

¹⁶ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 119.

¹⁷ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 119.

reality. Through postmodern realism one can reclaim the human value that the instrumentally driven program of modernity ripped apart.

In reclaiming human value through the realm of eloquent things, we find a place where things speak to us and are in turn spoken to in a rich process of intimacy and engagement. This includes the qualities and life forms of nature that are communed with through bushwalking, swimming, gardening, cooking, pet-keeping. It also includes the elements of community that are sacralised through celebration, food sharing, task sharing, dancing, playing and grieving. These, for Borgmann, are always 'real', embodied experiences connected to place. Borgmann cites the wilderness experience as one of the most immediate and potent conduits of eloquent reality. It has, he claims, the clearest voice among eloquent things and in such, "speaks to us naturally."¹⁸

While Borgmann hopes to make plausible the possibilities for a post-modern realism, he is well aware of the difficulties this involves. Uniquely amidst the theorists considered here he draws attention to the silencing of the ethical, material, and ecological conditions that preface and reinforce the maintenance of our current reality.¹⁹ It is, he observes, the material conditions, secured in technological, mechanical and geo-physical dimensions that have produced and will continue to produce both hyperreality and our responses to this state. The failure to acknowledge this, he says, is one of the major failings of contemporary theory:

What remains unexamined all the while is the power of products, of the material results of production, to shape our conduct profoundly. Any moral theory that thinks of the material setting of society as an essentially neutral stage is profoundly flawed and unhelpful, so in fact, is most of modern and contemporary ethics.²⁰

Borgmann similarly critiques the pattern within sociology and cultural theory of backgrounding the natural world, assuming that it is of no significance to processes of self- construction nor to processes of cultural construction. This means that:

Post-modern criticism gets arrested prematurely ... when having considered critically the modern arrogation of reality, it accepts naively the legacy of that

¹⁸ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 120.

¹⁹ Interestingly Giddens makes a similar observation, decrying sociologists for their lack of ecological consciousness: "Ecological concerns do not brook large in the traditions of thought incorporated into sociology, and it is not surprising that sociologists today find it hard to develop a systematic appraisal of them." Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 8.

²⁰ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 111.

arrogance, namely the disappearance of reality. Worse, post-modern criticism gets caught in dogmatism when it restricts the post-modern conversation to humanity and dismisses without further thought the possibility of eloquent things ... The post-modern theorists have discredited ethnocentrism and logocentrism so zealously that they have failed to see their own anthropocentrism. Why reject apriori the very possibility that things may speak to us in their own right?²¹

Borgmann's attention to the influence of material reality on the self's behaviours and relations, and on how this in turn leads to the space of eloquent reality, where one can engage with 'natural things,' is largely unprecedented.²² Here he breaks the cycle, found in postmodernism and most cultural theory, where it is presumed that it is only cultural products that are central to the construction of the self. In so doing he attests to the fact that it is the relations between the cultural sphere and the world of both material and eloquent things that we need to attend to if we are to avoid the atrophying effects of hyper-reality. Hence, Borgmann seems to depart from the 'culture only' discourse that dominates cultural theory and severs self from the world, and in this his position appears, at first glance, to resonate with the argument of this thesis.

However, there is a paradox at the centre of Borgmann's thesis. For while he acknowledges the power of the material and the ecological to shape the self, by invoking an 'intact' self, amidst ecological deterioration, and a closed, disconnected materiality, he effectively occludes the fundamental influence of the ecological and the material *on* the self. Borgmann's self while dishevelled by the world, is not broken. The world's diminishment, is not, fundamentally, his or her own. This self is epistemologically integrated, she knows what it is to be a self. And indeed what it is to be a self, this kind of self, is to be separate from the suffering earth. In this respect Borgmann returns us to the ontological foundations of our culture. And one worries that the world of eloquent *things* are actually, objects that bear no inherent relation to human being.

While Borgmann acknowledges that the transition between hyperreality and eloquent reality is difficult he does not suggest that it is impossible – at least at this stage. For him the terms of engagement that give eloquent reality 'voice' can be re-awoken once hyper reality is not in the foreground. Yet this supposed reawakening is deeply problematic.

²¹ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 117.

²² Bauman too, considered in the next section, comments on the power of material reality to shape human experience, insofar as human understanding is largely what he names as, *praxemorphic*, in nature. Yet unlike Borgmann, Bauman does not include the natural world in this epistemological exchange.

On the one hand it is uncertain as to how hyperreality, in a hyperreal world, is to be backgrounded. What kind of consciousness shift is needed for this to happen? Such a shift appears even more unlikely, when considering Borgmann's hope that it is the sullen, resentful self who will somehow seek out the world of eloquent things. Indeed it is this self who rejects the contours of regular, pedestrian reality. Yet a consciousness shift is what is needed, for the world of hyperreal glamour is not a cultural accident but the result of deep seated cultural patterns, a fact that Borgmann himself acknowledges even though he does not draw a connection between these patterns and the ontological premises of our culture.

I suggest this consciousness shift and search for eloquence is not available, for the sullen self is searching desperately, not for eloquent things, not for conversation, but for proof of his existence. He is searching for a sign, a reflection of himself in the world that shows that he does in fact exist. Further this self (by Borgmann's own admission) is shaped by the materiality of modernity, and thus in important respects reflects and reproduces the qualities of this world. And the primary quality of this post-modern, hyperreal world is its impermeability. The material spaces within which the sullen self is immersed are each shut off from the other, fixed, homogenous, repetitive, vacuous, lifeless, impermeable. What then emerges from such spaces is not the eloquent but the impermeable self.²³ Such a self is not one who is open to the 'commanding presence' of eloquent things. Indeed such things fail to command, obsessed as this self is with the world of self-reflection.

In the assumption that the modern self can go out, and will go out, and converse with nature and thus retrieve the inner self, Borgmann falls prey to the mistake of the deep ecologists, that is, he, like they, believes that while the cultural (and natural) world is distorted, the self in important respects remains separate from this world and remains

²³ I am referring here to the spaces in modern life in which we work, pray, eat, walk, drive, exercise and rest. Particularly compelling examples of the impermeability such places present are those of the concrete surfaced, gridded forms of car-parks, toilet blocks, stair wells, city pavements, motorways and bus stations, Auge's non-places discussed in Chapter Four. Even the less stark spaces have a corresponding rigidity and repetitive drain on the senses, such include supermarkets, sports ovals, fast food outlets, petrol stations, doctor's surgeries, hospitals, lecture theatres, waiting rooms. All these spaces are impervious to relation, they prohibit connectivity. Key to such disconnection is the disincentive to rest or repose in such spaces, their lack of homefulness. For while they are rigid and fixed in place their function as Auge illustrates is largely one of transit, the self does not settle into such spaces, but passes through them, disconnected, adrift and restless. This late modern self, reflecting such spaces, becomes likewise disconnected, impermeable, unsettled.

therefore essentially undistorted. Unrecognised is the way, world is in self, as much as self is in world, and thus the way the harms and wounds of one exist in the other. This premise of disconnection also implies that the idea of nature and the natural is not subject to cultural distortion. In this way access to 'nature' is seen to be purely and simply available, unmediated by cultural influence. Borgmann's suggestion that wilderness is the most 'natural' and 'pure' representation of eloquent things, showing "no trace of human intonation"²⁴ is testimony to this. Yet, as has been argued in Chapter Two, the making and the mapping of wilderness reveals the ineradicable stamp of human intonation. To assume that the *creation* of the wilderness bears no relation to culture is to perpetuate the deep seated cultural assumption that to be human is to bear no necessary ontological or epistemological relation to the earth. This then, is to collapse again, into the assumptions that have given rise to both the culture of ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity. A 'pure' wilderness uncontaminated by human influence is already a nature that is ontologically and epistemologically separate. Such a wilderness is not a place that we know and neither is it a place within which our humanity can be accessed or secured. It is not a place of eloquence but one of resounding silence. To visit wilderness is not then to bridge ontological and epistemological separation, for the nature/culture separation which defines us as human and nature as wilderness remains. The very fact that we cannot enter in such spaces without a litany of maps, compasses, global positioning systems, first aid kits, dried food supplies, bedding, and an epistemologically loaded backpack, full of know-how, is testimony to this separation. To overlook this is to ignore the cultural logic that is deforming ourselves and the other-than-human world. Indeed it is interesting that, increasingly, we cannot even navigate our own immediate surrounds without many of the same devices, such as phone apps, global positioning systems and street directories, and this is despite the orchestrated grid like formation of our streets. Likewise we would have little chance of securing food, clean water, heating or shelter if the systems that manufacture such for our 'comfort' failed. Alienation from the earth is not then simply from those places we fail to know it is also from those places and those ways of being that, in their empty repetition and impermeability, can increasingly not be known.

²⁴ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 30.

In brief, in assuming the space of eloquent reality is readily available, Borgmann fails to identify the deeper ontological foundations that have shaped modernity and continue to shape the late modern self. The pattern of being human that was executed and instituted at the indeterminate formation of western culture, one that has been reinforced and reproduced through changing epochs and has increasingly diminished the space for and thus the power of eloquent things, is one that has thereby shaped a certain mode of self. This self is one that is progressively more and more immune to the call of eloquent reality. Eloquent reality rarely 'speaks' to the late modern self, and rarely does the late modern self speak to it. What is more, to be human in our culture, is to know of the distinction that *separates* us from the world of eloquent things. The late modern self, moves not towards that which challenges our humanity, so defined, but towards that which reflects, repeats and celebrates the atomised self. He can be seen racing towards the bright lights, glamour and money back guarantee of a hyperreal world.

The distinction Borgmann makes between pre-modern times of 'cosmic-centeredness', 'religious unity' and 'communal celebration' and modern times of 'instrumental rationality', 'individualism' and 'hyper stimulation', further complicates his position. Under his interpretation these worlds are, in important respects, opposed. Yet the link, the decisive moment, that signalled the end of medieval modes of being and the introduction of modern frameworks is unaccounted for. For Borgmann this change is not explicable in terms of scientific, technological, economic, mechanical 'advance'. These developments are always secondary phenomena. Instead, invoking the cultural subconscious, he argues that what determines change and what determines choice is that which has already been, on some level, culturally decided. Within this setting the modern human is significantly constrained for:

Daily decisions are pre-formed by fundamental decisions. The fundamental and material decisions that have shaped the technological society leave little leeway to the daily decisions of the consumer.²⁵

While insightful and accurate, this leads us to ask, in what sense have the fundamental decisions of cultural life in modernity in fact been made? If we are returning to the very form and foundation of culture it seems that the decisions of cultural life derive from fundamental decisions about the nature of being human, and the paths taken to demonstrate, build on, and develop this nature, having already been set. What then

²⁵ Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 115.

appears to be the case is that the ‘fundamental’ decisions that determine the cultural trajectory of modernity are the same as those which shaped and crafted pre-modernity. Given ontological primacy, it appears then that it is not modernity itself that has produced the sullen, resentful self but rather that the sullen self is an outcome of an enduring cultural pattern crafted by a culturally formative logic. If this is so, it follows that an alternative to the sullen self is not to be readily found. The loss of pre-modern, forms, relations, and modes of being, where eloquence was more available, was a shift in the baseline on the road to the late-modern, sullen, self. Hence we face not merely a troubling emergence against which there are remote but fledgling and viable alternatives, but a structural logic that is self-replicating, self-reinforcing and increasingly impervious to difference, including the difference that post-modern realism suggests is available. This failure to acknowledge the ontological foundations of our culture distortion, leads Borgmann to mistakenly believe that one can readily switch between realities – between hyperreality and eloquent reality.

In invoking eloquent reality as a cultural alternative Borgmann seems to suggest that the post-modern self, while distorted in a hyper-real world, is, in fundamental respects, akin to the pre-modern self, that while the world has changed the self has not. And again in so doing he inadvertently affirms and reinforces the culture from which hyperreality springs. This is not to suggest that there are no liminal and mythical spaces and places left where eloquence can emerge between creatures, people, sand dunes, rivers and moonlight. These exist and are to be treasured and celebrated. However the nature of the eloquent encounters are, primarily, marginal and momentary. For while our culture has for the large part successfully forged separation into our ways of thinking, knowing and being, and while the world within which we spend most of our days and nights reinforces such separation, we are after all, not in fact separate and take on the properties of our world. In thinking otherwise we make an ontological mistake. What this means however is that neither are we in any true sense ‘individuals.’ The nature therefore of an individual encounter with the world of eloquent things does not, even where such individuals accrete in numbers, pose a real cultural alternative. This is why environmental gains, courageous in effort and extremely important, do not stem ecological destruction. They remind us what it is to be human but this reminder is quickly suffocated by a world made to tell a different story. While the founding logic of our culture remains un-interrogated, while the ecological is destroyed to produce and

prove the self, while that self is shaped by an impermeable world the *cultural* space for eloquence is not available.

Our experience in late modernity is then not simply a novel phenomenon resulting from cumulative humanistic and scientific developments but a shift in the ontological baseline of an enduring cultural logic of separation. This logic has, in what was for some time a slow and incremental process, shaped the world to fit its premises. This process, having accelerated in modernity means we live in a world that daily on a cellular, epistemological and ontological level speaks of separation. Deep and abiding relationship with the world of eloquent things, from this position, is a utopian hope for eloquence in a long mute world has been lost to the roar of machines, the drone of networks and the static hum of the screen.

On Zygmunt Bauman and the Anxious, Ambivalent Self

What then are the prospects for such a world? From Zygmunt Bauman's perspective this world is not one where the eloquence of things is able to speak to us. Nor does it provide the path by which we can counter and cope with the fast-forward surge of life in post-modernity. For him the alternative to post-modern malaise is not ecological but ethical.²⁶ Amidst his insightfully painted landscape of despair, wilful disinterest and ambivalence, the only reprieve is to accept the state of ambivalence as the new world order and within this access one's moral nature: a nature formerly suppressed by the authoritative dictates of modernity.

Bauman's densely documented analysis of the human condition suggests that modernity is still an abiding force with some of its structures being more 'solid' than ever.²⁷ What identifies the onset of post-modernity is not the loss of modernity's influence but a collective loss of faith that the power and influence of modernity will benefit the everyday person. Dennis Smith suggests that for Bauman, modernity is characterised by the search for betterment, "being better, doing better, getting better."²⁸ The

²⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

²⁷ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

²⁸ Dennis Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman: Prophet of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 7.

synchronised forces of capitalism, the nation state and modern science all promise the better life. This life is one of production, gravitating on the mechanical axis of industrial, assembly line order and the social axis of certainty, prediction and control, where one's social and familial role, one's work and consequently one's identity are firmly secured. In this setting, security exists where individual freedoms are contravened. With the arrival of 'liquid modernity,' the inverse becomes true, freedom emerges as the dominant motif and security rapidly diminishes. At once nothing is certain and everything is possible.

Liquid modernity became possible once it was realised that the forces of modernity rather than serving the better life and producing good ends for the majority were just as likely to disserve such a life and produce as many or more bad outcomes as good. This realisation was, in Bauman's view, not a cause for celebration as the post-modernists would have it, but issued instead in profound disillusionment and anxiety. It implies that everything that was once known, trusted, relied upon and understood is, in a fundamental way, no more. This change, Bauman suggests, has left the populace anxious and afraid, without guidance or measure, for "once the troops of normative regulation vacate the battlefield of life only doubt and fear are left."²⁹

Bauman proposes, however, that the *overall* order of things is resilient and not subject to change, the changes that have occurred are simply in the qualitative value of these forces and in the freedom to decide questions of value and morality for oneself. Only the *spell* of modernity has been broken:

The overall order of things is not open to options ... between the overall order and every one of the agencies, vehicles and stratagems of purposeful action there is a cleavage a perpetually widening gap with no bridge in sight.³⁰

Bauman refers to this switch of faith, perception and form as a liquidifying process. What makes modernity liquid is:

...its self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive 'modernization' as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long.³¹

²⁹ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 21.

³⁰ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 5.

³¹ Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, 11.

In this he describes the way in which the old order, those modes of being and behaving that were linked with tradition, community and ritual, were through the emergence and subsequent domination of modernity, melted. In their place an impenetrable and more solid order emerged, one that liquefies all else that fails to correspond to its economic rationalist demands. A sea of change thus grows around an immutable anchor. In the modernizing process some of the first forms to be melted were ethics, politics and culture. As such, economy was isolated from their influence and came to be a self-replicating and self-reinforcing monolith. It soon became normalised that whatever was not concerned with economics was considered to be irrelevant and/or a matter of purely subjective (and fickle) opinion.

In this process, the once solid, immutable fixtures of social and political life – truth, certainty, order, control, – become ‘fluid,’ inconsistent, shape shifting and on the move. Discontinuity, disorder, uncertainty, lack of control, spiralling risk and instability become the norm. Things, people, states, relations started to move, evaporate, change form –liquidify. In one sense this new fluid state is a liberating phenomenon for it frees us from the premise of mutual social benefit and a given future that earlier social models engendered. Yet at the same time it removes the authority that modernity in the maintenance of such narratives supplied. And since modernity has, in its world-shaping work, progressively ‘deanimated’ nature, humans in this process have also come to be:

...increasingly ‘naturalised’ so that their subjectivity, the primeval ‘givenness’ of their existence could be denied and they themselves could be made hospitable for instrumental meanings; they came to be like timber and waterways rather than like forests and lakes.³²

In a liquid world, the individual subject, bereft of the ‘givenness’ of her existence and the moral know-how which had characterised life in earlier community settings, is now in an ethically and epistemologically forlorn position. The responsibility of making decisions on one’s own and hoping these are the best ones, characterises the anxiety driven, burdensome state of liquid modernity. Such anxiety is further compounded by making such decisions in a constitutionally uncertain, unstable world, brimming with temptation and enticement. Bauman suggests that the response to this is twofold. The first response is one of ambivalence. The post-modern denizen tries not to think or to care too much, remaining suspended between alternatives or only very loosely attached

³² Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman*, 14.

to the alternative that has, for the moment, been chosen. Thinking too much and caring too much in an out of control, unpredictable, uncertain world are, after all, imminently hazardous pastimes. The second response is to shop. Shopping in the space of liquid modernity, has, Bauman observes, become not merely an obsessive pastime but a way of life.³³ Akin to my argument that consumption has become the dominant mode of experiencing life in late modernity, Bauman suggests that the self in liquid modernity, whether choosing between hairstyles, therapists, university courses, or holiday locations, is always in the process of scanning. In such scanning she is selecting, discarding, trying on identities. These are never ‘once and for all’ secured but the temporary certainty and satisfaction that shopping provides is enough to forestall and gloss over the deeper more disturbing implications for the self in an unstable world.

Bauman argues that the implication of the non-committed, shifting, disengaged and unattached act of shopping is the production of the same sort of individual. For “the way human beings understand the world tends to be at all times *praxeomorphic*, it is always shaped by the knowledge of the day, by what people do and how they go about doing it.”³⁴ Ways of being determine ways of knowing and the latter in turn reinforces the former. If, then, what people do is to ‘shop’ by processes of scanning, selecting, exchanging, discarding then this reproduces the shifting, unstable, fragile self who, in her despair, returns to more, scanning, selecting and discarding.

Bauman’s portrait of our culture is intuitively and experientially resonant. This is a world in which the (apparent) plethora and responsibility of choice overwhelms and burdens the floundering subject while at the same time on a deeper level there is no choice at all, for the substructure cements the space within which all other ‘choice’ is made. His descriptions here parallel Borgmann’s description of hyper-reality, the lack of stillness, engagement and interconnection, and the way in which the capacity to authentically choose is constrained, due to the dictates of fundamental decisions having been made. But, unlike Borgmann, Bauman does not invoke a postmodern alternative, a conversation with the world of eloquent things. Rather, his solution is to adopt a stance within this landscape that is both ethical and attitudinal. This means the acceptance of ambivalence and with it the acceptance of the uncertainty and instability this world

³³ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 82-90. See also Chapter Four where I trace the disengagement that is characteristic of the consuming life, 116-129.

³⁴ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 56.

presents. For Bauman ambivalence, uncertainty and instability are tenable states for beneath them is the solid, reliable centre at the core of human being. In other words, our moral nature. This nature, when released from the constrictive and prescriptive rule of modernity with its “command-issuing, order-making powers”³⁵ can rise phoenix like out of the ashes. We can feel with this new freedom, “our moral nature springing back to life with the same wonder that we might watch the leaves return to a tree after wintertime or press an ear against the bark to hear the sap rising.”³⁶

Bauman’s version of the ethical derives from a generous, basically optimistic, interpretation of the nature of the human and the social. He argues that society has evolved not in response to the Hobbesian command of bridling an inherently selfish and aggressive animal but rather in response to the kind of interpretation Levinas proffers,³⁷ one where society provides norms to negotiate the conflict that arises between ones pre-moral sense of unconditional responsibility for the other and the reality of living in a complex social whole where self-interest will be in conflict with care for-the-other:

...society is an arrangement for rendering the otherwise stubbornly and vexingly, harrowingly silent (because unspecific) ethical command audible – that is, specific and codified – and thereby reducing the infinite multitude of options such a command may imply to a much narrower, manageable range of options.³⁸

Bauman suggests that with the ‘death’ of society, the normative and restrictive structures given by modernity (and one can assume earlier, theologically prescribed periods) have been lifted and the individual is now free to decide their own moral ground. This does not present as an immediate problem, given that for Bauman, human moral nature is profoundly internal, both spontaneous and core to the human condition. But for this very reason spontaneous moral responses have the potential to drench one in moral concern for the other. If our moral nature implies a moral responsibility for the other, one that we as humans all share, and if in liquid modernity such responsibility is not determined by society, it seems that in this setting people may hypothetically be

³⁵ Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman*, 149.

³⁶ Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman*, 149.

³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas by Tamara Wright, Peter Hayes and Alison Ainley,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by Robert Bernesconi and David Wood, 168-180 (London: Routledge, 1988).

³⁸ Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* 49.

compelled to care-for the other on a rather relentless, daily basis. However, clearly this is not the case and in fact the inverse is more correct. This is where, in liquid modernity, the sense of concern and choice is in fact problematic. While moral care may be spontaneous, the space of moral *deliberation* and *decision* is a secondary phenomenon and this is where society – and in liquid modernity, the market – intervene.

Bauman accounts for this lack of moral *action* (not we must remember the lack of moral essence) in liquid modernity through a two-step process that begins with the culture of consumption and ends with transference of care for the other to care for the self. He argues that in liquid modernity the corrosion of ‘value’ as a social text puts the individual in the daunting position of having to decide each and every question of value for herself. In this setting she is never quite sure that her choices are adequate or that she is fully qualified or informed enough to so choose. This is a highly anxious space and it is one that the consumer market capitalises on. At a fundamental level consumer markets operate similarly to earlier authorities in providing, suggesting, and stipulating clarity in what seems otherwise a hopelessly ambiguous and complex situation – how to decide? The techniques of consumerism are however different from those of former regulation. Where norms and duties once helped to maintain the social whole, consumerism pivots on the ‘care’ of the individual. In giving false comfort to existing uncertainty and anxiety and in ‘selling’ further needs and desires consumer society shifts the emphasis from care and responsibility for-the-other to self-fulfilment. To be successful in this regard and to stand in as a moral arbiter the market needs to be trusted and seen to be effective in its capacity to meet needs. Bauman suggests that this is achieved through the cultural link that liquid modernity forms between moral care (gifting) and consumer goods. In this context consumerism (rewarding of the self) is justified as a moral act by the transfer of the ethical inclinations rooted and developed in the context of care for- the-other into the responsibility and context of care for-the-self.

This is achieved in two ways. Firstly, moral care is co-opted from social engagement and doing-for-the-other into material acts of *gifting* the other. While this includes donations to charities, environmental organisations and third world populations, Bauman’s focus is particularly on gifts to ‘others’ within our own community. Increasingly, money, things and presents take the place of a practice of care. The capacity to gift thus reflects a person’s capacity to be a good person. And since to gift requires financial means, the moral subject now needs to sell herself to the market, to become, as it were, product.

Here is the twist. In order to sell oneself for economic/moral worth, one needs to invest in oneself. This investment is by nature endless and takes multiple forms, given the uncertainty and changeability of liquid modernity. Key to this pursuit then is the fact that such investment is never complete, the self is never as 'full', satisfied, interesting, healthy, educated, set-up, secure as she could be. Indeed the search alone leaves the self exhausted and in escalating need of consumer rewards, treats, indulgences. Since I can only be there for the other once my needs have been satisfied, and since in a consumer society full of uncertainty and endless possibility, my needs are never satisfied, it is not possible to fully be there for the other. Responsibility for the other becomes simply responsibility for oneself, one's happiness, one's health, one's wellbeing and independence, "...the collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom is the Other as an object of ethical responsibility and moral concern."³⁹

This is an astute observation and the damage can be seen to be further exacerbated by alienation from the other as a condition of life in late capitalist liquid modernity, an alienation that is particularly problematic given that, in Bauman's account, one's moral nature, being there for the other, is first summoned by *proximity* to the other. Yet in the hyper-fragmented contours of post modernity such proximity is only accidental and fleeting. The other remains categorically remote whether the separation is streets, suburbs, continents, or species apart. Here, unfortunately, Bauman's position becomes itself trapped in the rigidity of early modern forms. For the 'other' to which he refers is simply that of other people. The other-than-human world as compositional of our moral and human ground is decidedly absent and it seems thus that our moral nature (and our human nature) bear no inherent relationship to nature itself. Redress then of ways of being human that destroy the earth and subjectivity are not available in his theory.

Further complicating his position is the fact that his hope and belief in our moral natures as a plausible and emancipatory possibility rests in the *individual* moral agent reconnecting with his true moral nature. In this emphasis on the individual Bauman inadvertently reinforces a culture within which the ethical, in my view, is not in fact available. What the cult(ure) of the individual in fact represents is the loss of ethical knowing available to culture and in its place, the invocation of 'objective' rights and the personal, subjective ground of choice and opinion. And yet within late, or liquid,

³⁹ Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* 53.

modernity subjective knowing has already been invalidated by the culture at large, deemed unverifiable, unsubstantial and ever-changing. This means the 'subjective' nature of one's ethical opinions can do little to transform culture and offer cultural alternatives. Further, as detailed in Chapter Four, subjectivity as a form of being has in late modernity been severely diminished with the self, approaching instead, the state of the object. The lack of efficacy of social and environmental groups to challenge the pattern of culture and achieve lasting change is a testimony to the dissolution of subjectivity as a culturally viable, epistemological form.

In reinstating the individual and the ethical promise incumbent in her, Bauman also returns us to the ontological foundations of western culture, those that exclude the other-than-human from the processes and practices of self-building, (or self-melting), from the template of being human. Like Borgmann's assumption that the self is fundamentally intact despite the social and ecological deformations of our world, Bauman fundamentally and inherently assumes that the self, while proximate to, distracted and persuaded by the forces of our culture, is not misshapen. The self remains somehow separate. Despite his many powerful and compelling insights Bauman thus fails to challenge the epistemological perimeters that produce and perpetuate the loss of subjectivity.

The late modern worlds of Borgmann and Bauman, ones of discontinuity, endless change, ambivalence, sullenness and hyperactivity, are then not ones where the voice of eloquent things can be heard, sustained or engrained in daily relations, nor are they places where re-enchantment and reprieve can be found by accessing an apparently fertile 'moral nature'. The patterns of being human, cemented into daily life, ones where discontinuity, ambivalence and hyper-reality reign, prohibit the emergence of alternative modes of being human that lay dormant in the natural world and our long forsaken relationship to it.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ This does not imply that isolated enclaves which navigate humanity differently have not emerged and will in all likelihood continue to do so. Indeed they have and will continue do so. I am speaking rather of the dominant *pattern* and system of acting out the human in the western psyche.

On Kenneth Gergen and the Saturated Self

In order to move away from the premises and patterns of the ‘culture only’ movement we need to shift our focus from the individual self and the martyoshkan selves it contains, towards an understanding of the self that is beyond the boundary of skin and mind. This kind of self is embedded in the world, permeating and composing identity and being with the other. Kenneth Gergen, in his discursive exploration of the post-modern *saturated self*,⁴¹ suggests this kind of self is now the norm. This saturated self is apocalyptic. In surviving the disintegration of promises of certainty and truth and reliability that, apparent in early modernity, are washed away in the uncertainty of late modernity, and in surviving the confusion, exhaustion and disconnection that the *saturation* of self (by social technologies) in ‘post’ modernity brings, s/he emerges victor, in the acquiescent and liberated rapture of ‘multiplicitious being.’

While Gergen, in some respects, surveys the late modern landscape in parallel fashion to Borgmann and Bauman, suggesting that “daily life has become a sea of drowning demands, and there is no shore in sight,”⁴² he diverges from the individually focused alternatives offered by these theorists by suggesting that the outcome for late modernity is the ultimate erasure of the self. It may thus seem that such a perspective is resonant of the ‘ecology of mind’ of which Gregory Bateson speaks, a step away from culture only discourse, towards a mode of speaking, thinking and being in which the self is no longer a helpful metaphor. At least it would seem so if the ‘natural’ world were part of this multiplicitious being, rather than such possibilities being determined purely by a late modern, technological, human centred space.

Gergen traces the evolution of the saturated self to the demise of both the Modernist and the Romantic self as cultural forms. According to Gergen, the Romantic self had an essence, a purpose, a ‘calling.’ It was by the discovery and the articulation of this voice, this essence, this passion, that one actually came into being, into selfhood. This was so even when the depths of feeling drove one into despair or madness. As individuals partook in the story making of their own particular self each story was by necessity, like

⁴¹ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁴² Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 75.

each self, different and unpredictable. One thus, as a person responsible for crafting the uniqueness of one's nature, had both the burden and the blessing of 'selfhood.' Further, the greater one's passions and insights the greater one's burdens and blessings. Gergen suggests that with the onset of modernity and the machinated human this kind of self was set aside. The emphasis was no longer on the unique self and her full expression, the emphasis was now on the icons of 'progress,' and 'development.' This was the capital 'S' story in which not unique selves, but experts, contributed in their own particular way. In this new model an individual's essence did not reside in the depths of one's soul, but was constituted by activities, vocation, 'character.' For Gergen, "the modernist self is knowable, present in the here and now, just slightly below the surface of his actions."⁴³

However with the arrival of the social mood and theoretical discipline that Gergen associates with 'post' modernity the machinations of modernity became exposed. It became evident that the world which modernity had promised had not and would not materialise. The enduring status of the 'truth', 'justice' and 'equality' that modernity had offered was found to be contingent, contextual and in some cases corrupt. Consequently, modernity's questions and assumptions were challenged. As we have seen, the challenge posed to the knowledge claims of modernity soon extended to the basis of any claim to truth and certainty. For if the narratives of modernity are shown to be, of their essence, cultural constructs then it becomes apparent that all narratives are constructs. They are simply modes of negotiating and interpreting reality in one way rather than any other, equally possible and plausible, way given particular sets of circumstances. Thus the pursuit of an ultimate and enduring truth was foregone and in its place arose the self-conscious construction of individual worlds and a self-directed subjectivity.

Gergen proposes that there was alongside the dissolution of the vanguards of modernity an important change that made the emergence of self-construction as an epistemological alternative possible. This was the explosion of social technologies made available by quantum developments in communication networks, publishing, and transport networks; achievements which have "produced a radical shift in our exposure to each other ... [and]set the stage [for] radical changes in our daily experience of self."⁴⁴ As the

⁴³ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 47.

⁴⁴ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, ix.

scale of these changes accelerated possibilities for, and exposure to, an unforeseen diversity, quantity and rapidity of communication, information and social representation, the self in becoming increasingly subject to such surroundings came, Gergen argues, to reflect these surroundings. This process of reinforcement and reflection has created what Gergen refers to as the *saturated* self. In producing and making available a multiphrenic array of cultural alternatives, spiritual possibilities, lifestyle options, these technologies undermined authority, decentred social traditions and invited doubt, ambivalence, uncertainty into every life detail. As Gergen narrates:

These relationships pull us in myriad directions inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an authentic self with knowable characteristics recedes from view. The fully saturated self becomes no self at all.⁴⁵

The saturated self thus approximates a multiphrenic form of being. The cacophony of external possibilities becomes a cacophony of internal voices that throw, doubt, anxiety, uncertainty at each decision made, each prospect considered:

It is a sunny Saturday morning and he finishes breakfast in high spirits. It is a rare day in which he is free to do as he pleases. With relish he contemplates his options. The back door needs fixing, which calls for a trip to the hardware store. This would allow a much needed haircut; and while in town he could get a birthday card for his brother, leave off his shoes for repair, and pick up shirts at the cleaners. But, he ponders, he really should get some exercise; is there time for jogging in the afternoon? That reminds him of a championship game he wanted to see at the same time. To be taken more seriously was his ex-wife's repeated request for a luncheon talk. And shouldn't he also settle his vacation plans before all the best locations are taken? Slowly his optimism gives way to a sense of defeat. The free day has become a chaos of competing opportunities and necessities.⁴⁶

The anxiety ridden, inconclusive and distracting landscape that Gergen describes, not dissimilar to Bauman's, is one deeply familiar to most of us who experience life in affluent western societies. Who, after all, is not ever more plagued by the multiple, competing calls to one's attention, the ever expanding array of *seemingly* plausible lifestyle, hairstyle, holiday location, house location, clothes choice, cuisine choice, relaxation, recreation options that surround us, invite us, beguile us, distract and perturb us on every front? The sullen self of which Borgmann speaks and the despairing self to which Bauman refers is Gergen's overwhelmed, splintered, *saturated* self. These selves are not mutually exclusive, they all co-exist and detail the corrosion of 'truth,' 'certainty,'

⁴⁵ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 7.

⁴⁶ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 73.

'order,' as reliable, consistent, culturally available states. But Gergen does not locate the saturation and consequent erasure of self primarily in the social, political and moral failures of modernity. Rather he suggests that such failures preface and inform the production of social technologies. It is these technologies that take hold of uncertainty and reproduce it in multiple and myriad directions.

However despite the anxiety and ennui attending this state of multiphrenic living, Gergen argues in a somewhat existential vein, that what this saturation can produce is a form of unprecedented liberation. This is the shift from the state of 'self' as singular, defined and knowable to the embrace of no-self, the venture into multiplicitious being. In this state, rather than resisting wave upon wave of alternative modalities, the self succumbs to the flow, becoming a conduit, a shifting point in a network of multiple relations:

As such technologies [of social saturation] become increasingly effective, we become increasingly populated with the identities of others and come increasingly to recognise the extent of our relational embeddedness. As this occurs the separation of self and other becomes diminished.⁴⁷

This partial erasure of the self is not a source for regret for it heralds the onset of a greater relatedness and the loss of constrictive and inhibiting boundaries. If true this could well present as a liberating and healing phenomena. However here we must ask in what, does such relatedness consist and whether such relatedness fed by technological multiplicity is an authentic and plausible phenomena? What are the splintered, fragmented parts, now separated from the 'superficial' coherence in meta-narratives and individual frameworks, in relation with? Certainly not with the other-than-human world through which being can be realised, indeed this world is the one on which a multiphrenic, technological space feeds.

In this transition from the observable and convincing experience of saturation to the state of multiplicitious being Gergen reveals his reliance on cultural assumptions and his inability to move away from 'culture only' analysis. For the multiplicity of which he speaks is embedded in the homogeneity of a human-shaped world which, to support its apparent array of choices, relies on the destruction of the other-than-human world, thus destroying actual diversity and options for change. And if the self takes on the shape of its world, as Bauman and Gergen attest, then this self rather than being a point of

⁴⁷ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 254.

multiple relation, is, like its world, impermeable and as such, less and less capable of relation. A further complication of Gergen's position is that in his interpretation the space for greater relationality is made available through an erasure of the self that is epistemological. The self Gergen describes disappears once he becomes unknowable to himself and unlocatable in the world. In this respect Gergen identifies epistemology as a correlate of ontology, to *be* a 'self' is to *know* of oneself as a discrete, integrated, separate entity. This creates a paradox for his model whereby relationality, by his definition, is not thus fundamentally defining of self but is to the contrary that which threatens the *separated* self. The space of total relatedness (even if it were available as he describes it) is a space where knowledge of the self, as a self, is erased. This once more, is the anxious self in search of proof.

By invoking the self as first and foremost ontologically separate, Gergen not only reinforces the premises of western culture but reveals the way they operate to not facilitate but prohibit relation. Key to our cultural ideology and central to Gergen's own logic, is selfhood as found in separation. To lose separateness is then to lose the self. This premise of *ontological* separation is not overridden by the fracturing and incoherence that Gergen cites as characteristic of post modernity. In fact such fracturing is, to the western psyche, further *proof* of separation. For the more connections between the geophysical structures that compose our urban spaces and the natural world are severed the more it seems we belong to the human and not the natural places, even if we belong to the former in a multiphrenic way.

While Gergen observes that, "as we become increasingly conjoined with our social surroundings, we come to reflect those surroundings,"⁴⁸ in casting these surroundings as only social and technological he overlooks the loss of connection (with the other-than-human world) that such conjoining implies while also failing to identify that where such surroundings that are dis-integrated, competing, incoherent, discontinuous in time, space and human experience, they can at only the most superficial, fleeting and inconsequential level make relation available.

Ultimately the cultural critiques of Borgmann, Bauman and Gergen, while suggesting ethical and epistemological alternatives, fall short in making such alternatives viable by invoking an intact self in a highly damaged world and thus reinforcing the premise of

⁴⁸ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 49.

separation that has given rise to systemic ecological destruction and the loss of subjectivity. At the same time they fail to identify the impermeability of the late modern self and do not acknowledge that this self is (systemically) resistant to ecological, ethical and epistemological alternatives. Indeed within this setting alternatives and 'solutions' do not mitigate or heal but exacerbate the conditions which destroy self and destroy world. The line of fault in these theories is the failure to theorise the way late modernity shapes the impermeable self and how this is linked to the perpetuation of the form of worldlessness that characterises our culture. Where the world is invoked in these discourses it is insofar as the ecological crisis is a threat to material wellbeing, and a consequence of a dysfunctional culture. While this is true, the way in which the diminishment of world diminishes and threatens the potential for human being is not broached. That this threat then, endangers subjectivity, provoking the self into and against world once more, further diminishing place, and further diminishing the potential for cultural awareness of such threat and such loss is also occluded.

At the same time materiality itself, the world in its geo-physical urban dimensions, is largely bereft of presence in these theories. This is despite the fact that it is these geo-physical forms that in their impermeable, concrete dimensions reflect, reinforce and construct the (impermeable) self. The world then as form, as substance and as subject is lost. What this makes evident is that without an excavation of the very thinking that shapes our culture and the patterns and relations such thinking gives rise to we will fail in understanding the nature of the crisis. It is to this no small task, to the 'ecology of mind' that Gregory Bateson offers as a mode of moving towards understanding, that I will now turn.

Three Minutes to Midnight

Some say you are on the ride whether you want to be or not, but who wouldn't want to be! You'd have to be crazy. Sure, some get to choose their own seats, others don't, but hey it's still a damn fine deal whichever way you look at it, and there are plenty of views! I am one of the seat people, I was organised, didn't sit around waiting for someone to hand it to me. I went out and got it! Hit the ground running!

Some people are pretty obsessed with getting a better seat, more comfortable, better view, more variety of seat positions and lighting, better service, gets a bit tedious for us up here. Though I spose they wanna feel that bit more relaxed, that bit safer, plus we, at the front, get there first. Can't blame em, but not everyone can be at the front it's just how it goes.

Anyhow they still get to choose among refreshments and there is a hell of a lot of those. The mind boggles!

Doesn't even feel like you are on a train! Could be anywhere! Sicily! Morocco! Thailand! The choices. Life, it's pretty easy, pretty comfy, can't complain about *that*. And we *are* going somewhere, not Morocco, this time, but definitely heading somewhere, that's for sure.

I've forgotten at the moment just where, but the drivers, the conductors, they know, and fuck, do we need to be anywhere else? Things just keep getting better!

A few hundred yards ago there were some people who wanted to stop the train. At first they didn't even want to get on, can't think why, then once they were on they were desperate to get off and spent the whole time staring out the window when there is so much to do and look at inside. Depressed, perhaps, psychotic, dreamer types, there's always someone wanting something else.

That was a while ago, they have quietened down now and no-one really thinks or talks about whatever they were rattling on about, no need. Besides they seem pretty content and comfortable, got with the program, so to speak.

The ride is pretty exciting, so stimulating. It's an incredible mix of stereophonic, ultrasonic, panasonic. It's all going on, flashing, beeping, whizzing, buzzing, scintillating, just scintillating.

You can forget all your worries and lie back. The first class seats have 25 different positions. Incredible what they can do.

Who would want to go back! Back to when you had to cycle or walk! So slow and arduous, tiring. The icy wind upon your face and then the heat, the flies, the ants, always having to look out for what you might step on or what might step on, bite or maul you. It was kind of steady, but ugh, boring, an early death for sure.

No real rest. Nothing like the train, you can rest, rest, rest, feet up, feet down, feet folded, pointed, stretched.

You can see a few people walking outside now. They certainly don't seem very happy. Miserable in fact, they look tired. Hot and hungry. Should have caught the train. Mind you, good thing they didn't, may have made it a bit crowded.

Why they walking so close anyway? No food near the tracks, no water, just desert. Not even much shade. Maybe they like the desert, maybe they have come to see the train, "Wave, kids, wave," "Smile".

Ahh, glad I got my ticket sorted, I was on to it. Can't afford to be slack, only got yourself to blame, work it, work the system so that then *it* works for you.

Glad I'm not out there, looks filthy, look at that rubbish, debri, the land, screaming for a drink, a nice cold beer – ha-ha, that'd quench her!

"Don't stare Ruby, look, look at the tele, those whales, spectacular, how close is that boat? Spectacular!"

We've got it all in here, everything you'd need, everything you could ever want.

The only thing that gets a little frustrating is the constant checking of tickets. "*Tickets! Tickets! Tickets!*" I only have one date of birth, one seat number, one aisle number, one personal identification number, one reading light number and one temperature moderator number. How hard can it be?

And yet they always check, five times a day. And the waiting! Tickets for food, tickets for drink, tickets for screen time...waiting, waiting, waiting...

Perhaps we will have a protest, a strike, we'll stop buying *their* food. See how long they will last.

We'll go to the other cabin, then they'll have to get more sorted. Mind you, it's a hassle walking all that way, particularly at dinner time. I could miss my favourite show. Fuck.

Well, we'll give it a week, a working week, five days and if they don't get the queues sorted, we'll see, we'll see.

They wouldn't like losing any business, wouldn't like that at all.

I hear they are on every train in Europe. Imagine if we could get them all to boycott at once. Wow. Then they'd have to be better organised. But I suppose everyone may get sick of walking to the next cabin. I spose that also means we have to hope the next cabins buffet is better set up.

Somebody did mention that they all get their food from the same place, they just give it different names. Well, who knows? We'll show em tho, we'll show em.

I hear they are looking at making the train even faster and more efficient. They have scientists and engineers working madly on it now. It's incredible what they can do, improving optimum fuel efficiency, revolutionising brake control, feedback minimisation. They reckon one day you won't even hear it go past. Not that we hear it anyway. But those people outside, won't even notice, gone in a silent flash. They'll be impressed no end.

Look there they are again kiddies, "Wave, wave."

And comfort! One day we won't even have to move from our seats, unless of course we want to. Everything at our disposal, food, entertainment, massage, at the flick of a switch or a voice command, probably eventually you will just need to think it.

Someone, some company, I forget who now, but someone quite philanthropic, have been pouring research money into ways in which the trip can be made more comfortable still, and longer, much longer. They are talking about discovery

breakthroughs in the systemisation of air-stabilisation technology. Here it is, “cutting edge science is finding ways to streamline and monitor air flow so that the air temperature, humidity, and ion input of the air directly surrounding the human body can be regulated.” At the moment it is at a fixed location, your seat. But eventually they hope to find a means to do this while you are mobile, wherever you are on the train. Imagine that!

For those who suffer from asthma and allergies and such, those not so suited to the indoors life, well they have discovered a way to inject antibiotics, anti-allergens and essential oils into the air flow itself. This is microbiology at its finest. And they are going to be able to provide it for free, or if not completely free, heavily subsidised.

I might ask them if they can molecularise a nice dry ale into mine!! I guess, thinking of that, there is other uses they could put the technology to, hallucinogenics, opiates, biological warfare, but nah, not gonna happen. The people would revolt.

And they need us.

Imagine the claims, the insurance, the paperwork, their reputation. You would never hear the end of it. Particularly cause people talk a lot on the train. That’s one of the main things they do. There’s heaps and heaps of communication, all the time. It’s a communication revolution. There’s a forum on the screen at the front of our carriage, at the front of every carriage in fact, where, if you talk into your own seat-side microphone, your point of view shows up on the screen, then someone else can comment and that shows up on the screen.

The great thing is you don’t know who commented, could be anyone, so no-one gets angry, it doesn’t get personal. There’s no falling out with people, that’s important, you wanna be able to enjoy the ride.

When the screen gets full, all the people’s comments and viewpoints get stored and put into a coloured file depending on the subject. You can access it anytime when you want to revisit your thoughts or theirs, anyone can, it’s magic. Magic!

This may need some improvement down the track, when one subject goes into another. But I hear they are working on it already. They are spending huge amounts of money, best brains in the country, to make the screens faster, more comprehensive, so you can

access all points of view at once, simultaneously. And the storage, tonnes more storage is going to be made available, you will be able to access comments from years ago. What a store of wisdom for future generations, our children's children, what will they think. Wow. The people outside can't use it of course, you have to be on the train, but that's their choice, you live with your choices, each to their own.

Most people are on the train anyway so it will capture most views, a good healthy cross-section.

I think someone smashed a screen once; *he* obviously got a bit personal. And it wasn't a good idea cause then everyone knew who he was! Some people were a bit upset, others didn't really care that much.

Most of us couldn't really see the point, what's the use of smashing the screen, what's that going to do? It's only going to be replaced in a couple of days anyhow. You can't go on smashing and smashing and smashing, won't make any difference, just lots of mess.

What's wrong with just writing your view up and be done with it. You've had your say. That's the best you can ask for.

Reach more people that way, the whole carriage and eventually the whole train, one day all views of all carriage members will be available to everyone at once! Imagine that, being able to have your view seen by the whole train at once, just, almost, as you are thinking it. That's freedom. That's how you can make a difference, make yourself count, make yourself known.

It won't be long now, won't be long...

Chapter Six

A System in Crisis

Crisis – *noun* (**plural crises** /-si:z/) – the turning point of a disease when an important change takes place, indicating either recovery or death.

As I am writing this, in the Southern hemisphere, it is late in the year. I write in a land called Australia, an ancient, weary, wise old land that is being torn apart, mined, drilled, pumped, blasted, clear-felled by the young, unwise, unknowing culture that resides here. It is a frightening and a deeply saddening spectacle to witness. And to bear witness, often, indeed mostly, feels like all one can do, for there seems a certain monstrous irreversibility, dare I think or say, inevitability, to the logic of development, which is of course the logic of destruction, which frames this culture. One observes therefore somewhat paralysed, overcome and overwhelmed by the scale and scope, the systemic reach of this violence.

I am writing in summer, early December, typically a hot, dry, time of the year that sees scores of children, families, adults, dogs flocking to the beach for relief. December this year, as it was last year and the year before is atypical – not quite recognisable in fact as summer. The sky is grey and darkening, rain is falling every other day and the air has a chill. Summer it must be said has not arrived, and we do not know what has – what effect these strange patterns will have on the fruiting, flying, nesting, sprouting, seeding life around us? One imagines that this life – the life that is connected and depends on and knows itself through rhythm, season, cycle, this life will be thrown off course. How does one sprout, seed, flower, migrate, when the knowing that brings this into being is itself displaced? We, however, the disconnected, will stay on our current course, changing the settings of our heating and cooling apparatus to account for the strange weather, importing grapes that have not ripened locally, re-planning barbecues and being glad we now need to water the garden less. Nothing it seems has changed for us – not yet.

Scientists and conservationists, environmentalists, poets, gardeners, philosophers, to name but a few of the concerned citizens, have long been decrying destruction as it has been wreaked against the earth and its creatures. One of the now most well-known side effects of such behaviour has in the last ten years garnered a more broad public attention – and debate – this is, of course, climate change. Undoubtedly this has garnered attention because it promises to be the kind of change that affects indiscriminately and broadly, globally in fact. The prognoses have not been good, conversations, debate and passion has run high yet little change has been made on the personal or public level. Many alive today seem to have a certain, often smug or secret, and also on some level understandable, complacency that whatever effects climate change issues they will not be alive to see it – that place called the future is a place beyond their concern. Others of course believe that whatever disastrous possibility comes along to confront humanity science and technology will fix. This is, despite, leading scientists, warning to the contrary.

In 1992 thousands of concerned citizens - scientists, NGO representatives and heads of states gathered in Rio to issue a warning that unless over-consumption, deforestation, species extinction, pollution and production of greenhouse gas emissions were radically reduced, life on earth would be in jeopardy. Since this time the culture at large has not only failed to cut back greenhouse emissions, deforestation, hem pollution and species extinction, but rather all these practises have continued and most have in fact accelerated.

Three nights ago, in a relatively small place called Perth, in a relatively sparsely inhabited country¹ called Australia, it was announced once more on national television that global greenhouse gases in the last two years have continued to rise – the chief culprits being named as China and India, though of course these places pump out gases to produce the cheap consumables we in the West voraciously demand. The rise in gases is not necessarily of itself alarming, the public is used, if not immune, to such data. After this data however another announcement was made – this was a warning by the world's climate experts that unless greenhouse gas emissions are radically reduced we will meet, in a mere five years' time, in the year 2020, an unrecognisable planet.

And yet... we do nothing.

This thesis is not arguing for when or even for why the western psyche separated itself from membership to the animate earth – though I assume the reason is something like terror. Such terror, if the state of the world speaks to it, seems to have intensified the

¹ I am using these terms to refer to the given assumptions and norms of what constitutes a heavily populated country. But of course these norms are blindingly anthropocentric and if the well-being of other creatures is taken into account Australia is also grossly overpopulated by human beings.

more rigorous our attempts at separation have become, the more alone and alienated from the animate earth we now are.² It is ironic, but from a systems perspective inevitable, that the very fact from which we as a culture ran – dissolution of the self in death – is the very fact that we have created in life itself. This thesis is suggesting that to assume and search for separation was, and is, an ontological mistake of the highest order. This mistake is, in late modernity, resulting in an epistemological failure, a cultural incapacity to know of such error and entrapment in a circuitous, self-reinforcing and ultimately fatal system. From this failure to know, the impermeable self emerges, marking the crisis point of our cultural dis-ease. Unfortunately, due to key characteristics of the system it is moving not towards recovery but death.

An Ecological System

It is the insight of Gregory Bateson, David Abrams and Freya Mathews³ among others, and it is an argument of this thesis, that the possibilities and the limitations for knowing are determined by the possibilities and limitations for relation with the animate other-than-human world. Knowing is in this respect a property not of the person, nor a thing, but a process that emerges between subjects, a process that brings subjectivity forth; a conversation the world has with another similar but different part of itself. This conversation may take the form of a wattle leaf's sinewy edge encountering the firm, dense underside of a fore thumb, or that of the waves lapping caress meeting a quivering tail, perhaps a shining iris absorbing and refracting the sun's morning light. Knowing is found in place, in all the composite of life forms that bring place to being, knowing is thus systemic and depends for its viability on the health, integrity and vitality of the system. To distort and damage the system is to close down and close off spaces for knowing to emerge. This thesis has traced this distortion and the exponential increase of such distortion over time, as each shift in the baseline removes awareness of

² David Abram also suggests that, “most of this era’s transcendent, technological visions remain motivated by a fright of the body and its myriad susceptibilities, by a fear of our carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control ... vast in its analytic and inventive power modern humanity is crippled by a fear of its own animality and of the animate earth that sustains it.” David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 69.

³ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), Abram, *Becoming Animal*. Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2005).

(epistemological and ecological) loss from the system. In this chapter I examine the implications of this distortion and loss from a systems perspective, in particular, I am focusing on the analysis of system properties and processes as described by Gregory Bateson and Donella Meadows.

While there are many different understandings of what a system might be the system which I am talking about in this thesis is the complex, ecological system within which we, as humans, inhere. This is a Batesonian and Meadowian system in the sense that it is the processes and properties of the living ecological system from which Gregory Bateson and Donella Meadows draw their understanding of system dynamics. There are, as Bateson and Meadows identify, certain properties, patterns and processes that all living systems utilise to enhance adaptability, survival, life. One of the key features is the “capacity to process and respond to feedback in self-corrective ways, a characteristic of living systems from cells to forests to civilisations.”⁴ Processes of self-correction help to maintain the system in a stable state, preventing oscillations, destruction and chaos, preventing a runaway world. Understanding the characteristics and properties that sustain a stable system state is key to understanding when a system is in danger of collapse.

Properties of a System

There is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds, and it is characteristic of the system that basic error propagates itself. It branches out like a rooted parasite through the tissues of life, and everything gets into a rather peculiar mess.⁵

An ecological system, as Bateson informs us, in seeking homeostasis, stability and balance is self-corrective. Thus it is inherently conservative, for it seeks always to integrate or eliminate disturbance and error in order to maintain the truth of its propositions.⁶ To do so it must sustain both flexibility and diversity, so that change (news of difference) can be incorporated into the system without disrupting the balance. To be able to absorb difference the system must remain viscous, permeable, and open.

⁴ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, xi.

⁵ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 489.

⁶ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

This conservative tendency means most systems, as Bateson and Meadows inform us, have “evolved or are designed to stay far out of range of critical parameters.”⁷ They manage to do so by the timely and effective operation of feedback mechanisms that regulate the system’s capacity for self-correction. To maintain what could be called the ‘norm’, the baseline, or as Bateson suggests, the ‘truth’, of the system such systems include a goal, a governor – a signalling device that detects excursions from the goal and a response mechanism. Most complex systems have multiple combinations of these. For the goal to be maintained and the response effective the paths of communication between these states/nexus points must be both timely and accurate.⁸

An example that both Bateson and Meadows use to explain this feedback is the function of a thermostat – whose goal is the maintenance of a certain temperature. Variations from this temperature are corrected by messages that are sent by the governor or measuring device to the furnace (response mechanism) which fires up or reduces the flame in correspondence to the message and thus meets the goal (the temperature the thermostat has been set to). The governor’s role then is to detect excursions from the goal (reports of error), triggering in turn the response mechanism to correct such excursions. If the required information cannot get from the governor to the response mechanism and back to the governor in a timely fashion this means that error cannot be addressed or is addressed too slowly for the effective maintenance of the goal. This creates oscillations of over and under correction causing instability and, if unaddressed, chaos. Where error persists it may over time come to dominate the system, setting off a positive feedback cycle.⁹

One key way that error persists in a system is if it remains for a time (a lag) undetected. While, as Bateson observes, there is ‘always a lag in these affairs’ since systems operate

⁷ Donella Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008), 149. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*.

⁸ For further explanation, see Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 309-337.

⁹ Meadows observes that the significance of the strength or efficacy of a feedback loop depends on the situation it needs to manage/correct – if the situation is one of low stakes, error is unlikely to dominate or if it does another correcting loop will kick in to restore stability (if the thermostat has gone awry – a person can step in to address it – in this case, person-heat-thermostat functions as a negative feedback cycle), if however the situation is complex, of high impact and prone to runaway it is crucial the feedback and the response are timely, accurate and efficacious, otherwise destruction and the onset of positive feedback loops are likely. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*.

in time and it takes time to transmit news, awareness is not immediate, if there is too much lag it can impair the communications of the system. Lags, impediments, and faults in communication can have various sources. They arise when the system loses flexibility, and in turn produce a loss of flexibility – the capacity to respond to difference (to react to change) in a timely manner. They are also caused by loss of difference (capacity for change) itself. Indeed these two losses function in a self-reinforcing manner, since a loss of difference (capacity for change) implies less room to move (a loss of flexibility), and likewise a loss of flexibility will ensure over time the domination of certain variables at the expense of others – eradicating possibility for difference.

Further, as Meadows suggests, a system may also lose flexibility (and thus create delays in communication) when buffers (often stocks) that stabilise a system against unexpected change become too large, inhibiting the system's capacity to respond to change per-se. Some examples of buffers that inhibit movement in late modernity are the social and legal buffers implemented to mitigate against uncertainty, accident and contingency. These include requirements to transport children and animals in a certain way, serve food or drink only in licensed premises or where a license has been purchased, change houses or put up houses under a set of approved restrictions, play music only in certain places at certain times, hold public events only under a certain set of conditions, the list goes on. Where the buffer against chance, contingency, accident, and change is large, as it is here, there is a loss of capacity for the system to receive and respond to difference – anecdotal knowledge, personal safety decisions, organic impromptu food vendors, to name but a few examples. This can create a kind of cultural cramp – a lack of capacity for change and a lack of capacity to respond to change.¹⁰

Another way a system loses flexibility is when key variables within the system move out of optimal range (a stable state) and become maximised. As Bateson tells us, this is an ongoing possibility for ecological systems whose elasticity implies the potential for runaway. Indeed the potential for runaway is built into ecological systems not only because all (and only) such systems are capable of error but because:

¹⁰ It is interesting to observe that from this perspective the time that gave birth to the French revolution presents as a healthier system state insofar as this system was prone to and was, as is historically evident, capable of significant change.

They are generally 'set' to maintain some variables at excessive levels: [for example] all species produce more young than are needed for replacement in a constant population, young that [in a stable system] are weeded out later.¹¹

When a system moves out of a stable system state, where all variables are maintained at optimal levels, to an unstable state where the system orientates towards the maximisation of one or more given variable(s) these variables dominate and the system loses diversity. This loss of diversity in removing options for change produces a further loss of flexibility. If this is not corrected, pathology occurs. Before long the system orientates itself towards maintaining the maximisation of one dominant (or few) variable(s). In other words, the system self-corrects to maintain the truth of a new bias – much as a cockroach when under threat or maimed will reproduce to maintain the population base of survival, an adaptation that becomes pathological when predator populations are not present to 'check' the population swell. In such circumstances the survival of the one variable overrides the survival of the system, even though this may imply the death of both. A fitting example Bateson uses to illustrate this is that of an overpopulated society such as our own. Where population, or human life and wellbeing, is maximised, the (cultural) system will work to make the conditions of overpopulation more comfortable rather than accepting changes (disease, warfare, unmediated disability, illness and old age) which would recalibrate population to sustainable limits. This is even though the long term maximisation of human population threatens the survival of the human species, most other species and the tenability of life on earth.

When the variable under question is maximised, it comes under stress and “must take a value up to its upper or lower limit of tolerance.”¹² As a result it is operating close to its threshold. Since a variable does not exist in isolation but in relationship to other variables, the operation of one variable at its upper or lower limit of tolerance will mean that any change in the associated variables, rather than minimising or recalibrating the maximised variable, will stress the maximised variable further. In this way a loss of flexibility spreads throughout the system to avert violation of the truth (the norm or the goal) of the system.¹³ The result herein is that the system will “only accept changes

¹¹ Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1984), 184.

¹² Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 505.

¹³ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 504-505.

which change the tolerance limits for the uptight variable,”¹⁴ perpetuating further the pathology. Any change in this instance is made in the inverse direction to that which is required for the stability of the system. This we see in such phenomena as the proliferation of disposable cups when recycling is key, likewise the time spent behind screens intensifies, and as seen in Chapter Four, reproduction of the non-relational self becomes pathological, at a time when relationship with the other-than-human world is crucial, whilst the mining of gas and oil forges forth at the very time when greenhouse gases need to be radically reduced. Seen from this perspective, the limiting and maximisation of variables in our cultural system, unsurprisingly, results in the experience of an immovable, unchangeable world whose fundamental forms cannot be altered or influenced except in the direction of embellishment.

What tends to happen when a variable in a system is maximised is that it becomes fixed to its new position. In such fixing the system loses further flexibility, it cannot as it were, communicate freely with other parts of the system and can no longer accept or integrate change. Bateson suggests this can be understood through considering the case of a man on a wire. For the acrobat on the wire to maintain his fundamental position, there must be great flexibility – freedom of communication – to other parts of the system, such as his arms and legs. If these are fixed, he will lose his stability and fall to his death. Like the acrobat, an ecological system, whether this implies an eyelid, a wetland, a conversation or a civilization, where variables are fixed will result in “discomfort, pathology and ultimately death.”¹⁵ Where information, recognised as being a difference that makes a difference, is the nature of living systems, (as it is for Bateson) a failure to adapt to or integrate new information is the death of such systems.

This failure – the lack of capacity to respond to difference – means the system cannot self-correct in any other direction other than the one it is headed, this, if left to its own momentum, produces a positive feedback cycle. A positive feedback cycle as defined by Meadows and Bateson is a self-reinforcing cycle where the more it works the more it

¹⁴ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 505.

¹⁵ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 505. This is commonly experienced in the ecology of conversations, which become uncomfortable, overheated and eventually terminate when one person maintains a rigid and inflexible stance and the possibility of ‘conversing’ or in Bateson’s terminology receiving news of difference, fails. Generally there are first oscillations, rising voices, aggressive tones, silence, and then the eventual breaking of conversation and accompanying failure in communication.

has power to work some more. The danger of positive feedback cycles is that, rather than self-correcting to sustain balance, the system in seeking to maximise its truth ‘corrects’ in the direction of error. Examples of positive feedback loops are the rich getting richer (more money in the bank, more interest, more money in the bank, more interest),¹⁶ likewise the poor getting poorer is also a positive feedback loop (less money, more debt, more interest on debt, more debt, less money), which, if left uncorrected, will result in a loss of social cohesion and order, as has been historically evident in social models where extreme inequity exists. Another example that Meadows uses to illustrate this cycle is the erosion of topsoil, where “the more the soil erodes, the less vegetation it can support, the fewer roots and leaves to soften rain and runoff, the more soil erodes.”¹⁷ In positive feedback cycles unless there is interference in the form of negative feedback loops to break the cycle, pathology will ensue and the system will head towards runaway and eventually, death: “reinforcing feedback loops are sources of growth, explosion, erosion, and collapse in systems. *A system with an unchecked positive loop will ultimately destroy itself*”¹⁸ (italics added).

If we examine the shifts in the baseline of embedded, relational knowing from a systems perspective and from the insight of Bateson’s ecological epistemology we can see that the consequences of unchecked ontological error have caught us in a positive feedback cycle, which is taking us towards an epistemological crisis – a failure to know of loss of knowing and loss thus of the capacity for human being. In fact, all our (apparent) machinations toward change are reproducing a fixed and rigid system, incapable of recognising difference, and thus incapable of change except in the direction of ontological and epistemological error.

The Advance of Error

This thesis has argued that the fundamental error that defines our culture is ontological. This is the belief that to be human is to be not merely different, but separate, from the earth and its creatures. I have suggested that when this error (first) emerged there was a

¹⁶ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*.

¹⁷ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 155.

¹⁸ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 155.

shift in the baseline of what it was to be human and what it was to know oneself as human. No longer was it to be embedded in deep relationship with the flesh and finitude of the earth but to be human was to know oneself against this material world. While ontology and epistemology are systemically related, if not, as Bateson says, in some way the same, it is important to note that the nature of this error when it was first made was not epistemological – a community and culture cannot know itself as separate from the earth when one's modes of knowing are woven in intimate relationship with the other-than-human world. And indeed separation is not the nature of reality. However, the perpetuation of this error over time bred changes in ways of being that bred changes in ways of knowing, that gave false information about the nature of reality whose consistent reinforcement produced and continues to produce epistemological error and ultimately a failure in knowing of what it is to be human.

One of the outcomes of this error, as traced in the first three chapters, is the loss of ecological consciousness, a loss that deepens as the path of error deepens. However, despite error existing in the system since the approximate beginnings of western culture, ecological consciousness, it has been argued, was still present in early civilisation. Error was not in this instance dominant. The system stayed within healthy parameters, conserved by processes of self-correction that maintained stability and balance. This balance was in large part sustained by the power and presence of the natural world and the intimate relations with this world that were endemic to agrarian and village life.¹⁹ If we consider any one of many communities in antiquity whose day to day living was spent in deep symbiosis with the land, we must surmise that changes in the populations or habits of a local species of flora or fauna, would have to have been noticed. Such a change would, for the population, carry news of a difference. Given the lack of buffers or blocks between the human and other-than-human communities, such news could circulate relatively unimpeded. This flow of information implies that the system maintained flexibility (the capacity to respond to a change in a timely manner) and diversity (options for change):²⁰ it maintained ecological consciousness.

¹⁹ As Davies notes, medieval society was overwhelmingly rural and remained so up until very late in its development. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 331.

²⁰ This is not the claim all forms of rural or indigenous life necessarily operate in complete synthesis with their environment. It is the claim that, at the level of pattern (not exception), where symbiosis with the land exists – error is less likely to dominate – given the correction such symbiosis affords. Further the relatively unchanging nature of these communities is, from a

That ecological consciousness was heightened in this period is evidenced, as we saw in Chapters One and Two, by the fact that while incursions on place, were by today's standards relatively insignificant, the distress at such change was, in terms of population, the relatively integrity of the land, and survival of such distress on the historical record, relatively extreme. Such distress also bore the signature of a personal lament. Exemplifying such concern is the metaphor Plato uses of a dying man, to describe the damaged land, "what now remains compared with what then existed is like the skeleton of a sick man, all the fat and soft earth having wasted away."²¹ Conveyed here is the sense not of 'the environment' being damaged but the very flesh and soul of life. This personal supplication born of embedded relation was to be revisited by the conservationists some 2000 years later albeit in a maladaptive system where change (except in the direction of error) was increasingly implausible and ecological consciousness was largely lost to the system.²²

As I have argued in this thesis, ecological consciousness is something distinct from what we today tend to imply by this term. It is not 'environmental' knowledge, of the kind that is currently sought and accumulated. This latter sort of knowledge is the product of what Gregory Bateson calls, purposive consciousness. By purposive consciousness, he means consciousness or knowing that is driven by conscious intent and purpose, the kind of thinking that characterises day-to-day life. This consciousness is non-recursive and thus not aware of itself as part of a system. By contrast, ecological consciousness is a form of recursive, or what I would name as relational, knowing – a knowing that emerges through deep relation and one whose relational processes take place primarily in the non-conscious sphere of *being*. As I will discuss in more detail later, this mode of being is *necessarily* non-conscious, for such relations are mutually compositional – they bring the human *into being* as much as the human in this setting composes the elk, the hound, the landscape. Deborah Bird-Rose in her time with the Yarralin people, observes

systems perspective, evidence of processes of negative feedback (self-correction) that advance system stability — if error does however come to dominate and a closed system evolves then the usual result is that collapse of the system will ensue, as was the case with the Easter Islanders. It is not difficult to draw from the Easter Island experience an analogy to our own closed, self-reinforcing system, which suggests that our imminent fate may be that of the Islanders. See, Jared Diamond *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (United States: Viking Press, 2005)

²¹ Eliza Marian Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 43-48, 99.

²² See Chapter Three.

in this regard, that it is ‘the dingo that makes *us* human’,²³ (*italics added*). The ‘making’ of the human does not emerge through individual intent or will, nor is it made possible by any exclusive or particular quality of the human. From this perspective one cannot consciously set about to construct one’s identity or self-hood, nor one’s sense of what it is to be human in the world. This is of crucial significance given that the error that defines our culture also exists at the non-conscious level, as a response and resistance to the existential anxieties and mysterious, finite conditions of mortal life. Because this error is non-conscious, so too is its redress – this being the non-conscious, non-purposive, knowing that emerges from embedded relation. This form of knowing was historically found in relationship with the other-than-human earth and was often accessed through ritualistic, sometimes religious, practise that paid tribute to the mystery and wonder of the universe. It was one that the Romantics attempted to reinstate, except that by this time the advance of error meant such knowing was only available to the individual and not to the culture as a system.²⁴

While this knowing, this ecological consciousness, persisted through the medieval period and perhaps to some extent and in some places in early modernity, and while error for this time did not dominate, it nonetheless remained in the system. For a long historical chapter the chief mechanism for its advance was the invocation of a Christian God. To be human during this long stretch of time was to know of God, his word and his way. Likewise to know of God was to know of one’s humanity.²⁵ This knowing was both conscious – as practised through scripture, prayer, public invocations of belief, and non-conscious – premised on faith, communion, mystery and the noumenal sense of the

²³ Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human* (Oakleigh, VIC: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

²⁴ It is interesting to observe that with the loss of such mystery and the diminished access to and experience of the sacred, the wondrous, comes the reduction of ritual to a practise and process of consumption. This is the reign of the object and objective conscious knowing. Thus we find that where the sacred is sought it is most commonly done through the purchase, collection and reification of objects. North American dream webs hanging over suburban beds, assembly line concrete Buddha’s propped in gardens and courtyards, proliferation of indigenous Australian dot paintings in galleries worldwide are but a few of the fraught and failed attempts to purchase the sacred through the culturally dominant epistemology, even though this is a form within which the sacred does not inhere. See Chapter Four for further exploration of the attempt to find proof in the object.

²⁵ As Davies writes, “medieval civilization is frequently called ‘theocratic’ that is, it was governed by the all-pervasive concept of the Christian God. God’s will was sufficient to explain all phenomena. The service of God was seen as the sole legitimate purpose of all human enterprise. The contemplation of God was the biggest form of intellectual or creative endeavour.” Davies, *Europe*, 431.

divine as immanent in the ‘heavens’ and in earth. Central to this epistemology and the advancement of error was the casting of the material and other than human world, the casting of nature, as epistemologically other. Nature in this setting became the unknown and more significantly unknowable realm, as we saw in Chapter Two, it became the wilderness and the wild – it was all that stood outside of and was defined against the garden. This was a logical move, in the sense that to intimately know the fleshy, finite, other-than-human world is to *be* part of this world and this was to the western psyche everything that the human was not. True human ‘being’ was not to be found in this mortal ground but was to be found in the realm of immaterial, changeless and eternal forms. As I have argued, to make an ontological error is to ultimately breed epistemological error, for ideas or perceptions about the nature of human being will produce a search for knowledge that confirms such ideas or perceptions. These exist in a feedback relation to each other, such that with the progression of such knowledge, with each shift in the baseline, alternative ways of knowing and being have become less and less available. The continued search therefore for being, in the fixed and changeless world, meant that the search for knowing became a search for a fixed, inviolable – ‘objective’ form of knowledge.

It could be pointed out that even in less science dominated eras the natural world was certainly known of and about. This is true. It is important however to not conflate modes of knowing. What was sanctioned through the age of Christianity was a cerebral, purpose driven investigation into nature but that which was avoided, disapproved (and over time diminished) was ethical and existential communion with the other-than-human world. Nature throughout this period, and more so in the subsequent Enlightenment era, could be researched, investigated, speculated about, spread bare and probed. Yet past the point where it became other it was to be increasingly not entered into or known in any empathic or relational sense. In this vein Worster argues that it was Christianity that made the, “detached, external view of nature possible by overthrowing pagan animism, in which the human mind was submerged in communion with the inner spirit of the natural world.”²⁶ Likewise he quotes Berdyaev, as proposing that it is the Christian faith that was the cause of man’s (sic) emotional severance from the natural world.²⁷ While I do not agree that Christianity initiated detachment, but

²⁶ Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy* (San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 28-29.

²⁷ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 29.

rather pose that its advance represents a baseline shift issuing from an earlier ontological error, the significance of Christianity as illuminated by Worster and other theorists signposts an important transition. As we saw in Chapters One and Two, under the Christian gaze nature in its raw undomesticated form became either a vulgar, inhuman, morally devious place or else the idealised site of spiritual and ethical cleansing away from the competing desires and temptations of civilised life. In either setting it was not kin, nor was it home, it was rather a place to flee from and destroy, (and thus maintain the ‘truth’ of the system) or return to in pilgrimage in order that (moral) insight, or from a systems perspective ‘correction’, be given to the culture at large. Bear in mind this insight was not of *system* error but of error *within* the system whose correction would enable the system to return to its given ‘truth’. What this distance and this duality produced was the *ethical* license to destroy nature as the populace saw fit and in so doing extend God – and as a consequence humankind’s kingdom.

In heralding another shift in the baseline this distancing meant that another level of knowing was lost to the system. This, as discussed, was a loss of ethical and existential knowing. However the loss was not yet pathological, that an ethical relationship, albeit distorted still existed with the other-than-human world indicates the extent to which the ethical at this time remained a culturally viable form of knowing. This, I suggest, is due in part to the force of Christianity as an ethically binding text. Medieval ethics, as Davies writes were “expounded by the Church ... governed by hierarchical notions both of the social order and the moral code... betrayal of God was the ultimate evil.”²⁸ The significance of Christianity in this context is that while ideas of what it was to be human were part of a collective conversation and practise then so too were ideas of the good part of such conversation and practise – part of ‘being’ itself. The presence of alternative knowing was, I suggest, here available because purposive consciousness was not at this point dominant, consequently the system was still both theologically structured and to a considerable extent enchanted. As Berman writes, this period was one, characterised by unity, meaning and purpose.²⁹ Life in this setting was too mysterious, meaning that alternative knowing and unknowing were immanent. This was not a mystery in need of ‘correction’ by science nor did it need to be consciously accounted for. Indeed this was not at all the point, for in this period, despite the idea of separation, unity still persisted as a form of being-in-world:

²⁸ Davies, *Europe*, 438.

²⁹ Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World*, 50-51.

Tiny isolated settlements existed in an overpowering wilderness of forest and heath ... people's perceptions of these surroundings lacked any strong sense of discrimination between what later times would call the natural and the supernatural, between fact and fiction, between the present and the past.³⁰

When, however, as we saw, error intensified and the domination of objective, purposive consciousness prevailed, the ethical (along with the mysterious and noumenal) was no longer available *to culture* as an alternative form of knowing but was only available as an object of purposive consciousness – a product of the dominant epistemology whereby it reinforced this epistemology.³¹ Likewise knowing of being-in-place also dissipated at the level of culture.³² Yet, prior to this shift, the corrective power of nature presided. This is not merely the claim that nature, in her abundance and glory, was in antiquity and medieval periods more dominant than the dispersed human communities. While this is true the more important truth is that the presence of nature in this form posed an epistemological alternative to the error characterising the system. Insofar as ontological error and the knowing that emerges from being in relation with the other-than-human world are primarily non-conscious processes, human communities that exist through no will of their own, in a context where life is oriented around the power and presence of the other-than-human world must have epistemological error at least partially corrected by this presence. The world does not and cannot in such a setting conform to or confirm the premise of human separation.³³

In this setting human being cannot be realised separately from relations with other-than-human lives, thus knowing ones' humanity in this context means delineating oneself amidst difference (non-human others) and, as we will see when considering Bateson's ecology of mind, it is only difference that allows human being to be realised, it is, again, the dingo that makes *us* human. It is in the same way only relationship to difference that makes knowing of human being available to the experience of the self. What these diverse ways of knowing imply from a systems perspective is that the system, at this time, was able to maintain flexibility and responsiveness to change. Consequently, the

³⁰ Davies, *Europe*, 432.

³¹ See Chapter Three.

³² See Chapter Three.

³³ Again connection may not always breed care- even, as is patently apparent, within inter-human relations, I would suggest where it does not there is some pathology at work – nonetheless the observation of error corrected is not an argument for or against consequent human behaviour, the key point rather is that potential for change exists where error has not transmuted into pathology.

system could maintain stability. It is unsurprising in this regard that from antiquity to the end of the medieval period relatively few changes emerged in the style and mode of living as conducted between human and other-than-human communities. Revealingly the historically prescribed ‘darkness’ of this time refers to this lack of change, the constancy of the period, unmarked by any rapid technological, scientific ‘advance.’ As Davies narrates “there is an air of immobility about many descriptions of the medieval world ... what is represented is physical immobility, social immobility, intellectual immobility.”³⁴ The irony in this critique of immobility is that it is considered to represent a state of impaired growth rather than a stable system state and accordingly it is assumed that the contemporary world is much more dynamic and capable of change than the medieval world, when from a systems perspective, the opposite is the case. The modern world is approaching changelessness in its key features, approaching a state of entropy.

The danger of each baseline shift is that the loss of knowing is two-fold. It is the loss of knowing of what was – in this instance communion with the other than human world *at the level of culture*, and it is also, past the threshold where the new baseline is established, a loss of knowing of this loss – loss of the sense that things were or could be otherwise. Once the new norm or truth is established, the former truth is lost to the system – as the system orientates its processes to ensure the survival of the new norm. There is, as Bateson describes, a formal causality to these processes for:

We become what we pretend. And something like that, some sort of self-fulfilment occurs in all organisations and human cultures. What people presume to be ‘human’ is what they will build in as premises of their social arrangements, and what they build in is sure to be learned, is sure to become a part of the character of those who participate ... *any answer which we promote as it becomes partly true though our promoting of it, becomes partly irreversible. There is a lag in these affairs*³⁵ (italics added).

The error thus becomes built into the system. Further, as we have seen, each shift in the baseline reinforces the error more deeply. This means the longer the error remains

³⁴ Davies, *Europe*, 291. Notably this time was characterised by mass human loss in the shape of plague, famine and religious crusades. However this loss from the systems perspective does not suggest a change in the system itself – it does not alter the key variables and in fact can be seen as a stabilising factor – protecting the system against excessive dominance of human population. The kind of change that is key here to the advancement of error – is change between the human and other-than-human communities, not that affecting solely human populations.

³⁵ Gregory Bateson and Mary Catherine Bateson, *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 178.

undetected the less potential there remains for it to be detected. Further, the longer it is undetected the more it escalates. From such escalation issues the domination of one variable – one form of knowing – and the suppression and eradication of other variables – other forms of knowing. By eradicating these alternatives the potential to check error, the potential thus for a system correction is lost. Left uncorrected a positive feedback (self-reinforcing) cycle emerges. Here pathology and ultimately crisis result, with the system oscillating towards recovery or death.

A Difference which makes a Difference

While I have been suggesting that the loss of relationship with the other than human world implies a loss of knowing of what it is to be human and thus a loss of capacity for human being, in its existential and ethical forms, the connection between loss of difference and loss of knowing is a literal one when seen from the perspective of Bateson's ecology of mind. If we consider ecological loss from this perspective it becomes startlingly apparent that the loss of knowing (correction of error) that attends ecological destruction has created a positive feedback loop that is moving not towards recovery but towards death of the system.

Mind, for Bateson, is not to be understood as a purely material phenomenon – a set of nerve endings and synapses, nor as an immaterial free-floating entity but is first and foremost a system, an ecological system. As an ecological system, mind is inseparable from its material base and has the capacity to process and respond to information in self corrective ways. It is through such organisation of information, through processes, patterns and flows that mind is active. In this definition, mind can and usually does include “non-living elements as well as multiple organisms, may function for brief as well as extended periods, is not necessarily defined by a boundary such as an envelope of skin, and consciousness, if present at all, is always only partial.”³⁶

The nature of this mental form, pattern and process is *difference*, to be precise – a difference which makes a difference travelling in a circuit. An example Bateson uses to

³⁶ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, xi. Abram here concurs suggesting that, “the modern, civilized understanding of *mind* as a purely immaterial power has been born by a process of subtraction, slowly and by increments, from the ancestral experience of the invisible atmosphere as a thick, meaning-filled plenum in which we're immersed – as a living field of intelligence in which we participate.” Abram, *Becoming Animal*, 273.

illustrate this is the instance of a ‘man’ cutting down a ‘tree’. The common interpretation of this event describes the action in terms of a subject – the man cutting down the object – the tree. The man is driven towards this action by conscious, purposive, intent. This understanding of mind presents mental process as linear, bound by a skull like form, non-recursive and not part of a cybernetic system – the conventional understanding of mental process. Conversely Bateson suggests that mental pattern and process consists not of a separate ‘I’ against a separate ‘it’ but consists in transforms of difference, where:

Each stroke of the axe is modified or corrected, according to the shape of the cut face of the tree left by the previous stroke. This self-corrective (i.e., mental) process is brought about by a total system, trees-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree; and it is this total system that has the characteristics of immanent mind.

More correctly, we should spell the matter out as: (differences in tree) – (differences in retina) – (differences in brain) – (differences in muscles) – (differences in movement of axe) – (differences in tree), etc. What is transmitted around the circuit is transforms of differences. And ... a difference which makes a difference is an idea or unit of information.³⁷

This theory of mind is completely at odds with the common perception that identifies mind as a property pertaining to human being and relegates all that is outside of such to the opposing and inferior status of matter.³⁸ Given that mind is a property not of the person but of relations between difference and if all we³⁹ can ever know is difference, never the *ding an sich*, then it is apparent that the possibilities for knowing depends on the possibilities for difference. The eradication of difference is therefore the eradication of the potential for knowing, it is in a very real sense, the loss of mind. It is perhaps for

³⁷ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 317-318. Interestingly from a phenomenological perspective David Abram also elucidates the insoluble union of person and place: “To directly perceive any phenomenon is to enter into relation with it, to feel oneself in a living interaction with another being. To define the phenomenon as an inert object, to deny the ability of the tree to inform and even instruct one’s awareness, is to have turned one’s senses away from the phenomenon.” Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 117.

³⁸ This conventional perception of the opposing realms of mind and matter is what Val Plumwood critiques. Here she refers to the logic of dualism that underwrites western culture. This she describes as one where the master consciousness, to maintain power and to define itself, makes inferior, submissive and undefined (without identity) the ‘other’. In our culture the other of the male, white, cerebral, mechanical world has been women, blacks, nature the emotive and organic worlds. Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

³⁹ By ‘we’ Bateson is not referring to any one aggregate of humans but the ‘we’ of the community of life through which mental pattern and process subsist, this may thus include the grasshopper, the senate, the tree frog, the bill of rights, Barack Obama and rainfall.

this reason that, as Meadows suggests, loss of bio-diversity is for systems theorists a crime of the highest order.⁴⁰ A mindless system is in this regard an ignorant, unknowing system – one that is not equipped for survival. Indeed, Bateson suggests, the mindlessness that characterises our cultural system also reveals itself in the choice, as a culture, of the wrong unit of survival. Rather than choosing organism plus environment – allowing thus for self-corrective processes to be maintained – we have chosen simply (human) organism, eradicating in the process the environment and thus we end up with, “[one] species versus the other species around it or versus the environment in which it operates. Man against nature. You end up, in fact, with Kaneohe Bay polluted, Lake Erie a slimy, green mess and ‘Let’s build bigger atom bombs to kill off the next door neighbours.’”⁴¹ Bateson was here writing in 1976, since then things have not improved, eighty eight percent of the oceans are saturated in plastic, wars and terror are escalating, anthropogenic species extinction is killing off the source of all wonder, beauty and mystery and the vast percentage of children and adolescents are addicted to social media and media itself, while the outdoors becomes fundamentally ‘unknown.’⁴²

Revealingly, the destruction of nature is often colloquially referred to as ‘mindless’, implying a loss of knowing, thought or care. Indeed, as we have seen with Bateson’s ecology of mind and the loss of knowing revealed by the shifting baseline mindlessness past a certain point is built into such destruction, whereby with continuing loss of diversity the capacity to know of loss of mind becomes increasingly unavailable. Again the system danger of loss of knowing in this instance is not a failure to identify or comprehend what or how many of which species are disappearing. This knowledge, while important on certain levels, is not that which, if diminished, advances system

⁴⁰ “...the ability to survive by changing ... the wildly varied stock of DNA, evolved and accumulated over billions of years, is the source of evolutionary potential, just as science libraries and labs and scientists are the source of technological potential. Allowing species to go extinct is a systems crime, just as randomly eliminating all copies of particular science journals, or particular kinds of scientists [or one may say, poets] would be ... the same could be said of human cultures, which are the store of behavioural repertoires accumulated over not billions but hundreds of thousands of years. They are a stock out of which social evolution can arise ... without such social evolution there is no chance for adaptation, survival, life.” Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 160.

⁴¹ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 491-492. In a similar vein Paul Shepard argues that our alienation from and destruction of the other than human world, in alienating us from what is meaningful and spiritually and ethically necessary in life has created a culture of madness. Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982).

⁴² See Chapter One, in particular Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).

error. In fact the inverse is the case, for this type of knowing, that tells of the world as a calculable, measurable object, is a product of such error and is exactly that which in dominating the system advances pathology.⁴³ What continues to be unavailable to the system is the ethical and existential knowing that would otherwise enable the system to self-correct and stabilise. As Meadows would suggest, where buffers or stocks are low stabilising influences are lost – if we think of this knowing as ‘stock’, found in the integrity of nature and in relationship with nature, then it is clear that it is not at a sufficient level to stem ongoing patterns of destruction.⁴⁴ Instead what is advanced is a pathological error that is, in its own pattern of self-validation, driven against earthy being and belonging and is formally predicated to destroy the earth. It follows that if the earth becomes unfit for human life then the premise of separation is correct, earth is not the appropriate place for human being. There is a formal relationship here, a relationship of ‘erroneous’ ideas.

While for a time error failed to dominate, due to the system maintaining self-corrective processes, fed by the diverse ways of knowing found through ethical and existential relations with nature and the sacred, error has now become pathological and the system is headed towards death rather than recovery. These conditions were set in place by the turning point that signified departure from the medieval period to the rise of Enlightenment science and the Industrial and French revolutions. This period has received much historical scrutiny for the changes it has borne witness to.⁴⁵ However by and large this scrutiny has been for, what I believe are, entirely the wrong reasons. The mistake many theorists have made in looking at the period of cultural translation from medieval times – often named as the mysterious ‘dark’ ages – to the time of en‘light’enment science, is to assume that the technological, industrial and scientific changes that precipitated and characterised the enlightenment period indicated significant *cultural* change. Adherence to this thinking is part of the reason why most cultural theorists remain unaware of the marginalisation or absence of place in accounts

⁴³ Further, as Meadows points out information about quantity is a low leverage point from which to change systems. Changes, in quantity or degree, do not alter the structure of a system or affect its core values, paradigms or epistemology, neither can a change in numbers work effectively or quickly enough to avert disaster if a system is headed for runaway. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 147.

⁴⁴ Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 150-151.

⁴⁵ Davies writes that, “the fifteenth century is generally taken as the century of transition between the medieval and the modern periods. In certain spheres the quickening pace of change led to a decisive break with the medieval tradition.” Davies, *Europe*, 444.

of late or post-modernity, for implicit to such accounts is the premise that whatever went before the eruption that was modernity is now irrelevant to any understanding of culture or the self.⁴⁶ Yet as I have argued in this thesis the changes to which the revolutions gave rise, rather than signifying cultural change have, to the contrary, more deeply and dramatically reinforced the core tenets of our culture and the possibility of building these tenets into the world. The error, which to this point had consistently advanced with each shift in the baseline, making the system increasingly limited in its capacity to self-correct (except in the direction of error), became with this transition, pathological. To thus suggest that something new and unprecedented happened in this time is to fail to apprehend the deeply engrained ontological error that made the epistemological and investigative method of enlightenment science plausible. This world orientation could only have emerged out of a thinking that was grounded in the false notion of human separation, one which was relentlessly shaping the world to these premises. In the move towards enlightenment science the ontological error was given the means, the technique and the license to multiply. As Bateson warns:

...when you have effective enough technology so that you can really act upon your epistemological errors and can create havoc in the world you live, then the error is lethal. Epistemological error is all right, it is fine up to the point at which you create around yourself a universe in which that error becomes immanent in monstrous changes of the universe that you have created and now try to live in.⁴⁷

Emerging during the post-enlightenment years was, I contend, not an unprecedented development but another baseline shift in a pre-existent pattern. Nature, formerly a source of moral repulsion (or sanctification) was in the new world order rid of moral weight altogether, becoming instead an object of scientific, environmental or personal discourse. Nature thus became more and more alienated from human experience, a retreating moral landscape interacted with only by personal choice. When such choice was made, it was made as an individual preference, sanctified neither by God nor the culture at large.⁴⁸ The point here is not simply that nature became an 'amoral' ground but that with the domination of objective knowing (in the framework of purposive consciousness) moral knowing itself dissipated except as an object of the dominant

⁴⁶ See Chapter Five.

⁴⁷ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 493.

⁴⁸ It is no surprise therefore that God who was formerly evidence of human being, became in this transition that which required evidence (proof) and in the form that the dominant knowledge dictated.

epistemology. As part of the dominant epistemology it took the incontestable form of a right, a fixed object of political, social and individual discourse that could in no way threaten the reign of the object. Outside of this the ethical became relegated to the culturally peripheral form of subjective knowing, the changing sea of personal opinion, choice, preference. Yet subjectivity, itself a casualty of system pathology, can in no way ‘correct’ the system, subjective choices and stances, in their current form, cannot effect any ethical change at the level of culture. For to be subsumed by the dominant knowing is to share its self-reinforcing form – and this is the form of the object, one that does not imply cultural change but simply reproduces error and ways of managing this error.

The first effect of this system shift was the capacity to epistemologically (and thus ethically) distance oneself from the other-than-human world. Ultimately this distance has meant a separation of the self from subjective relations with the other-than-human world and a loss of capacity to know of human ‘being’, at the level of culture. Yet even if, or where, ‘subjective knowing’ was available it could not effect system change for in failing the test of, and being defined against, the dominant knowing – the test and definition of proof – it was shaved of cultural validity. As we saw in Chapter Four this transition and loss was symbolised by the decline of the Gilbert White way of being in the world: a fusion of self, God and nature. Married to the decline of theology as a world-orienting presence was the rise of industrialisation, liberalism, individualism and rights discourse, the life of Gilbert White past this point would no longer be available as a *cultural* alternative while the lament for such loss would be henceforth an individual cry in the dark. This was in effect the domination of purposive consciousness.

What this change meant was that where choices surrounding relationship to the natural world, or for that matter choices surrounding religion were made, these choices bore no system effect. In this setting despite valiant attempts at saving nature made by naturalists, conservationists and environmentalists, the knowing that would precipitate change was not available to the system – except as an object of purposive consciousness, whereby it inadvertently perpetuated the pathology. For this reason as error intensified attempts to ‘save the earth’ while, for a time, becoming more prevalent, proceeded in inverse proportions to their effectiveness, the more these attempts multiplied the greater destruction rose.⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that such outcries caused

⁴⁹ As has been noted, numbers and quantity are a low point of leverage in any system – by themselves they are not effective in creating system change, hence the fact that rallies attracted

destruction in a linear cause-effect fashion. The logic is systemic. Such attempts in being embedded in epistemological error cannot but reinforce such error. This is particularly so when the self is referenced as the epistemological and moral centre thus objectifying the other-than-human world as a site of moral concern and discourse. In so doing, protestors also unintentionally (remembering that the operations of this system are a non-conscious process) perpetuate the idea that cultural change is in this way available and in such conceal from collective understanding the dissolution of the ethical as a cultural form of knowing. In declaring and displaying collective action – albeit a collection of discrete and separate individuals – the loss of ethical knowing available to the system becomes less apparent, while the idea of cultural transformation is perceived by such action as viable.

As we have seen with the conservationists, even where real attempts at reintegration with the land and an authentic moral/spiritual relationship are made– the error was here at the level of culture too advanced to allow for the sustained presence of alternative knowing, a difference which *makes a difference*. Instead this difference was fed back into the system to produce a ‘solution’ that perpetuated the dominant form of knowing and being. The dominant epistemology with every outcry continued to be maximised, and was pushed closer and closer to its threshold limit. Consistent with a positive feedback cycle, the domination of one variable (that of purposive knowing) means that changes in relationship to place and changes to these very places, rather than driving a correction in relationship to place, drove the search for purposive, ‘objective’ knowing further and further forth. Hence conversation became increasingly not about subjectively known places (where these relationships still existed, as these too started to rapidly decline) but about ecology and the ‘environment’, while the focus on communities of species, as favoured by the early day naturalists, gave way to specialist scrutiny and discourse whereby a species is studied in isolation from the community within which it inheres. The very retrospective emphasis on conservationists’ *discourse*, as I have argued, as more

more people or that more people signed petitions or ‘knew’ about ecological degradation is not an indicator of the kind of awareness that is required for system change – it does not indicate an epistemological shift – and does not thus indicate ecological consciousness. Meadows however makes it clear that past a certain point numbers can create leverage. This is when they reach a threshold that tips off another leverage point higher in the system, for instance interest rates control the gains around positive feedback loops – what this means is that if, for example, interest rates are sufficiently low, the ‘rich getting richer’ feedback loop may be to some extent corrected or slowed allowing the system to generate a negative feedback pattern. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems*, 148-149.

indicative of their sentiment than of their relationship to the places they fought to conserve, is testimony to the continuing advance of error and consistent shifts in the baseline over the last sixty years. So even while the ‘ecological crisis’, so named, marks not human exclusivity, but our own fate, our frailty, vulnerability and dependence, this ‘awareness’ is not used to check our mode of being human, to reassess the implications of our excess but, to the contrary, is taken as an opportunity to all the more *demonstrate*, and *prove*, our humanity. The ‘ecological’ crisis has thus become a forum for cultural reproduction. Given this, technological ‘solutions’ abound: the frenzy to find cures, draw graphs, chart predictions, genetically manage and modify food sources, seed clouds, develop warning systems, communicate breakthroughs, is rife. The search for proof continues.

Subsequent iterations of environmentalism have necessarily perpetuated error as the system has already lost the diversity and flexibility – the knowing – to integrate a difference which makes a difference. By now, the twenty first century, as discussed, ethical knowing has on the one hand been subsumed by the dominant objective knowing and on the other hand been relegated to the culturally ineffectual space of subjective knowing. From neither setting can it foster or change relations with the other-than-human world. This does not imply that alternative attempts to redress this error have not been made. Deep ecology, as discussed in Chapter Three, was one such attempt. Rather than reinforce technological solution and materialist reform, deep ecology attempted to challenge our way of relating to and with the natural world, naming broken relation as the core source of ecological malaise. But, as we have seen, the reproduction of error persisted – for deep ecologists still relied on the assumption that the nexus point of solution began with the individual self and the corollary but unstated premise that this self, despite an ailing world, is somehow still intact. Indeed the implicit premise is that it is the integrity of the self that allows the self to access and aid a broken world. Yet the notion that heretics maintain agency and that this agency increases in direct ratio to the capacity for self-expression, irrespective of the health, stability and integrity, of the ecological and cultural system of which they are part, is itself a symptom of the pathology of the system. Embedded herein is the assumption that the individual is sufficiently separate from other-than-human contexts – the earth’s fate is again not our own. To admit otherwise is to admit that we may not possibly know how or what is needed and indeed that the acceptance of not –knowing may be a step towards correction.

The irony herein is that the modern shift to the individual as the key moral authority is considered culturally to be an advance, a gain from revolutionary France. Indeed it *is* an advance but one of advancing error. In this development the culture of separation is heightened in a way that is non-cognizant of the synthesis between world and self. Given that ‘what we believe of ourselves should be compatible with what we believe of the world around us’,⁵⁰ if we make of the world an epistemological object so too do alternate ways of knowing become objectified – bearing no inherent subjectival relation to self or world. When we transform being human and knowing of this being into knowing of object as proof of being – we too become object. From this the place for subjectival relation is lost.

The pathological development is, as we have seen, the onset of a positive feedback cycle in the direction of ontological and epistemological error and with this the loss of system correctives (diverse ways of knowing) and an associated loss of the capacity to know of this loss. This is dangerous enough on its own but is further exacerbated by ongoing belief in the ethical as an efficacious form of cultural transformation. Such belief commits a category mistake. Albert Borgmann, as discussed in Chapter Five, observes that not all choices are made on the same level, some choices pre-form the possibility (or lack of) for other choices. For example, once a cultural choice has been made around automobile production and use, the choice to travel to work by donkey, horse or by foot is largely unavailable. Instead the choice becomes – ‘should I catch the bus or drive to work, or which sort of car best suits my transport needs?’ In analogous fashion, Bateson argues that learning does not all occur on the same level. There are different levels of learning with some being of a higher and some being of a lower logical type. For instance, the learning that takes place when a rat encounters an electrical shock inside a box, is of a lower level than the hard wired learning that the rat has about exploration. People, Bateson suggests, make a category mistake when they map learning of a lower level or type onto a higher level. In the example cited, such a mistake is made when it is perceived that the rats are not ‘learning’ when they re-enter boxes after the shock. Bateson suggests that the inverse is in fact the case, the experience of the shock corresponds to and reinforces the higher level learning that exploration provides information about the world – it teaches you about your environment and that exploration is needed for survival in this environment. The shock is helpful information

⁵⁰ Bateson and Bateson, *Angels Fear*, 177.

and not a disincentive to continue exploring. As Bateson observes, much “can be learned from a single instance but not certain things about the class of such trials or experiences.”⁵¹ The class of things or experiences is always of a higher logical type than the member of the class.

The more embedded, higher level learning is what is often referred to as the hard-wiring of a person, a system, a machine. It is the nature of the nature of things. As I have argued in this thesis, ontological and epistemological error exist in the hard-wiring of our culture. In proceeding uncorrected, this error has been hardwired into our modes of being and knowing. This is not consciously penetrable, it has become the nature of our ‘exploration’, and is of a higher logical type than any ‘choice’, ‘idea’, ‘preference,’ made in the single instance. What I suggest is taking place with the endless forums for and sharing of opinion, choice, preference, ideas is that this information is being mistaken for information representing change in the character of the knowing that defines the system, when it is not, because the difference *between* opinions is not a difference that makes a difference. Here, phenomena of a lower logical type (the ideas of the given conversation) are mapped on to phenomena/knowing that belong to a higher logical type (the hardwired ideational framework). In this mapping pathology occurs. The nature of this pathology is misunderstanding and further epistemological error. In this mapping we believe that change is galvanised through such expression and is more viable the more such expression multiplies – when neither of these are the case. We can as a consequence spend our whole life debating these questions - what is it to do or be good? Is it innate or socially imposed? How can one define virtue? - as many have, and come no closer to ethical knowing.⁵² Again the lack of efficacy of environmental activism is testimony to this lack of feedback. The domination of ontological and epistemological error is not affected; it is reinforced by the fluctuations of this lower level of learning. Like the rat whose experiences from exploration reinforces the value of exploration individual expressions of rights, choice, opinion reinforce the value of the individual as a *separate* entity with claims to cultural objects. To challenge or transform the cultural error what is required is a paradigm shift. However, as Meadows notes,

⁵¹ Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, 123.

⁵² Obviously these kinds of conversations have always transpired – since ethics had civic and legal implications and perhaps even before. The point is however that these earlier conversations did not commit a category mistake as such a mistake can only be made when ethical knowing is not available to the system and these kind of discussions pre-suppose that it is – or indeed ‘stand-in’ for or are taken as evidence of such knowing.

paradigm change is the highest leverage point in a system and is astoundingly difficult. As we have seen from the effects of the shifting baseline syndrome and the dissolution of system correctives, this change presents as nearly impossible, when the knowing that might drive such a change is increasingly not available to the system. Instead, the given paradigm is advanced as the solution to any (human or ecological) problem that arises.

The ecological effect of this epistemological crisis is the ongoing, mindless destruction of the other-than-human world, driven not primarily by purposive intent.⁵³ The belief that ongoing destruction is simply a result of conscious and careless human behaviour is a product of the pathology of the system, as is the idea that such destruction can be stemmed by technological/scientific solution. Trapping us in this illusion is the domination of ontological error and the domination of purposive knowing and in it the loss of other ways of knowing and being human. It is important to remember here, however, that it is the *domination* of this knowing (married to ontological error) that is the problem, not the knowing in and of itself, which, in a stable system would be recalibrated to an acceptable level.

As we saw in Chapters Four and Five, the further key implication of this error is the loss of subjectivity and the consequent search for self in the forms where subjective relation is unavailable – the form of the object; a search that in taking one further away from relationship with the other-than-human world and in destroying this world to resource objects, further intensifies ecological destruction. Loss of subjectivity is two-fold, it issues from the desecration and marginalisation of the other-than-human world through which knowing of human being and self is realised. As we have seen, this is because it is difference which enables knowing. Subjectivity is also lost due to the domination of purposive objective knowing. Given this domination the doubting anxious self is caught in a restless search for proof, and searches precisely where proof cannot be found – in the realm of ‘objective’ knowing as found in the object. This has produced a positive

⁵³ Though of course this is sometimes the case the main point is that this logic is not in any way conscious and that the will towards ecological destruction is not one of individual conscious intent, in the common usage and understanding of the term ‘conscious’. Indeed if this were the case we would be looking at quite a different kind of system, a newer, less dangerous and less pathological one than the one we now inhabit. Rather, the ‘intent’ in this logic is subterranean. And the non-conscious operation of this system is itself part of the reason for the self-reinforcing circularity and immanent disaster to which it is leading us, as this very system is dominated by purposive consciousness and as a system has blocked access to non-purposive consciousness – blocked access therefore to that which would contest its fundamental assumptions.

feedback loop such that the more proof of human being is sought in the realm of non-living objects the less the experience of, and thus knowing of, human being is available. The less knowing is available the more proof is sought, the more it is (in this way) sought the more subjectivity recedes. Consequently we inhabit a world obsessed with the self and replete with technologies that mirror, adorn and visually reinforce and reproduce the individual self, all the while desecrating and crowding out spaces for other-than-human being. The self, as cultural theorists identify, is in crisis – lost, sullen, desolate, unanchored and desperate. This is evidenced both by the destructive impulses apparent in an excessively individualised culture (crime, drug addiction, excessive consumption) and the constructive impulses (obsession with viewing and reproducing the self. ... ‘selfies’, Myspace, Twitter, Facebook etc.) The mistake is made in returning to the same self for solution – this again rather than redressing system error continues to maximise the dominant variable, to focus on the ‘self’ to fix the self is to further advance pathology and crisis. Thus we see brilliant analyses of the saturated, despairing self, pursued separately from any analyses of the self in the context of a desecrated other- than-human world. The fate of place is still seen to have no bearing on the fate of the self and the malady of the self is seen to bear no relation to ecological destruction. Indeed, to the contrary, it is collections of selves mobilising the dominant epistemology that are seen as that which will fix the ‘ecological’ crisis. It is from this system that the impermeable self emerges and ecological destruction escalates.

The dangerous turn, the point of crisis we have now reached, is that the separation which has characterised western culture from the beginning, is becoming increasingly concrete. In having structured such separation into our ways of knowing, our ways of being, we have not only created a self-reinforcing system invariably caught in a positive feedback cycle where each search further exacerbates anxiety, loss, and crisis but in the process have near annihilated the ‘checks’ which have for so long staved off the pathology and death of this system. In losing so many of our other-than-human kin with whom we have shared a well-trodden, formerly cherished, evolutionary path, in further losing relationship with these creatures and places, with the ethical and the sacred – which are as Rodney Donaldson says perhaps the same thing⁵⁴ – and in building closure into our system we are creating an impermeable self, caught in an impermeable world. This is a self and a world not subject to change. It is a closed, fixed system, a veritable

⁵⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), xviii.

chreod from which further shifts in the baseline are not possible. In fact the only change likely is complete breakdown – an unrecognisable planet. The most disturbing and tragic aspect of this is that the inability to re-*cognise* is real in every sense. We may not only be meeting a planet that is geo-physically unrecognisable but at the same time are caught in the incapacity to be cognizant of this loss. Herein is the logical and epistemological outcome for a culture that is driven by the error of separation, if no other proof suffices then the very destruction of the earth itself will prove human supremacy.

In 1967, with such concerns in mind, Gregory Bateson agreed to lead a conference focused on the habits of thought characterising western culture. Here at Burg Wartenstein in the Austrian Alps cybernetic theorists, mathematicians, anthropologists gathered together. Deep in thought and conversation this diverse but kindred group in “the beauty and natural peace of the environment ... realised for the first time that it is truly likely that in one way or another human actions would destroy life on this planet.”⁵⁵

Let us know otherwise.

⁵⁵ Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye*, 187.

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