

An Eco-Socialist Civic Virtue: Democracy, Ethics, and
Ecological Emancipation

By

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Max Foley-Keene is a political theorist who received his PhD from Brown University in 2026. His research and teaching focus on democratic theory, environmental politics, and the history of political thought. His academic research has been published in *Philosophy & Social Criticism* and is forthcoming in *Democratic Theory*. At Brown University, he was awarded the P. Terrence Hopmann Award for Excellence in Teaching and is currently a graduate fellow at the Cogut Institute for the Humanities. He writes frequently for *Commonweal* magazine.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Introduction <i>Immobilization, Narrative, and Virtue in 21st- Century Environmental Politics</i>	1
Chapter One <i>After Despair: Socialist Virtue and Radical Resilience in Rosa Luxemburg</i>	22
Chapter Two <i>Zora's Vision: Ethical Innovation and Burdened Virtue in W.E.B. DuBois</i>	62
Chapter Three <i>An Eco-Politics That Moves: Undomesticated Love and Traveling Activism in Anna Tsing</i>	101
Conclusion <i>An Eco-Socialist Civic Virtue</i>	133
Works Cited	145

INTRODUCTION

IMMOBILIZATION, NARRATIVE, AND VIRTUE IN 21st CENTURY ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

This project is motivated by, on the one hand, a frustration with how activists and academics have been talking about environmental politics, and, on the other, a fear concerning real-world obstacles to eco-political transformation. The discursive problem is that environmentalists consistently undertheorize the role of character formation in enabling robust political action against climate change. The practical problem is that the initiation of individual eco-political action runs up against weighty dispositional obstacles: despair, disempowerment, and disorientation, most especially. This dissertation is thus an effort to redirect a conversation (around the kind of ethical formation that could empower a radical eco-politics) and to work through dilemmas of action (how individuals might overcome despair, disorientation, and disempowerment).

I came of age politically in a left-wing environmentalism that was essentially hostile to talk of individual character. Activists in this more populist, even eco-socialist, camp had been waging a decades-long discursive campaign against the American environmentalist mainstream, the “middle-class” environmentalism represented by groups like the Sierra Club (Shutkin 2001) (Hultgren 2025). That “middle-class” environmentalism, left-wing critics sharply observed, failed to recognize the centrality of our political-economic institutions to environmental degradation (Park 2015) (Sinnott-Armstrong 2010). According to the climate populists, a politics oriented around “buying green” is incapable of posing a meaningful challenge to the capitalist institutions devastating our planet (Klein 2014; Aronoff 2021; Saltmarsh 2021). Naomi Klein, the most influential left-wing environmental writer of the past two decades, makes this case with characteristic lucidity.

After years of recycling, carbon offsetting and light bulb changing, it is obvious that individual action will never be an adequate response to the climate crisis. Climate change is a collective problem, and it demands collective action (Klein 2011).

This critique gets something important right about how individuals under capitalism are constrained from pursuing environmental sustainability. As Battistoni (2025) has noted, *contra* neoliberal partisans of “free choice,” capitalist markets radically limit ordinary individuals’ power to select for ecological sustainability. In Chapter One of this dissertation, I argue that a commitment to individual ecological virtue ought logically to occasion an anti-capitalist politics. Any 21st-century environmentalism worthy of the name must be committed to radical institutional transformation.

But structural critique doesn’t get environmentalists off the hook from talking about individual character. An eco-politics oriented toward institutional transformation seems to place rather extraordinary demands on its individual participants. If individual experiences of despair and disorientation prevent us from buying energy-efficient light bulbs, such dispositions will *certainly* inhibit us from joining collectivities that challenge the entrenched power of fossil capital. The structural dimension of the problem only accentuates the characterological demands facing those who attempt to initiate ecological change. If an earlier generation of environmentalists turned to the language of virtue to theorize how individuals might be consistently inclined to make “green” choices *within the constraints of liberal-capitalist institutions*, this dissertation turns to the language of virtue to theorize how individuals might be inclined to attach themselves to collectivities seeking eco-socialist institutional transformation.¹

¹ Socialism, for me, can usefully be described as the incursion of the democratic principle into the economy. One powerful critique of capitalism is that it’s a form of life that deeply restricts our capacity to govern ourselves. Under capitalism, important questions about how we want to live — the organization and conditions of labor, the

My approach departs from three dominant modes in environmental political theory: eco-democracy, new materialism, and eco-Marxism. The scholarship on eco-democracy proposes institutional frameworks that incorporate ecological interests and, as a second-order consideration, outlines the political virtues that would be necessary for citizens to maintain those new institutional frameworks (Eckersley 2004; Dryzek and Pickering 2018; Dobson 2003). Eco-political virtue serves a purely hypothetical function in much of this work. *If* eco-democratic structures existed, these scholars ask, what excellences would citizens need to render those institutions resilient? This dissertation asks a prior question: what virtues do political actors need *right now* to enable political struggle for eco-democratic institutions, against the forces destroying the planet? I hope to reorient the focus of eco-democratic scholarship from ideal theory to the dilemmas and obstacles facing real-world eco-political actors.

Though they do not enlist the language of virtue, scholars of new materialism are deeply concerned with the habits, dispositions, and perceptual orientations human beings embody *vis-a-vis* the more-than-human (Bennett 2010; Connolly 2011; Latour 2017). The fundamental commitment of these authors is an embrace of more-than-human animacy or agency. On this

determination of need itself — are, to a significant extent, made outside the realm of democratic deliberation. Our activity in the economy, as workers and capitalists alike, does not appear as a joint venture; rather, “the economy” appears to take on a life of its own with independent governing power over us. As socialists like W.E.B. DuBois have argued, we are best habituated as democratic subjects when we’re capable of deliberating over the material questions that shape our daily lives. My socialism endorses parliamentary, political democracy and many of the institutions associated with the democratic socialist tradition. As a basically gradualist vision, it can locate hope in imperfect reforms and advances which nonetheless deepen economic democracy. Thus, eco-socialist civic virtue does not require some revolutionary rupture for its cultivation; it is generated *in media res* through the struggle for new forms of political and ecological life.

account, the world is not divided between human agents and inert matter but rather composed of composite material assemblages whose functioning transcends human intention. What emerges from new materialism—especially the new materialism of Jane Bennett, whose 2010 classic *Vibrant Matter* concludes with a creed—is a secular spirituality of re-enchantment. If individuals cultivate an ethical-spiritual attunement to more-than-human animacy, a more decent form of life may perhaps follow. Yet it remains unclear whether new materialism offers an ethical-spiritual orientation for those engaged in practical environmental politics. What bearing does an attunement to the animacy of material assemblages have for an activist in a state of immobilizing despair after the failure of a major public campaign? Is an anti-Cartesian faith in “one matter-energy, the maker of things seen and unseen” (Bennett 2010, 122) likely to motivate a busy single mother to stand up to the natural gas company polluting her drinking water? Ultimately, new materialism struggles to theorize the relationship between eco-attunement and eco-political formation.

One might expect Marxist environmental theorists to be especially inclined to offer an answer to Lenin’s question: What is to be done? Yet much of eco-Marxist scholarship is consumed by exegesis of Marx’s ecological thought (Foster 1999) (Saito 2024), historical-conceptual debates over capitalism’s relationship to the “Anthropocene” (Moore 2017), and long-running personal antipathies between prominent eco-Marxists (Hornberg 2020).² As John Hultgren (2026) argues, eco-Marxists have offered sharp analyses of capitalism’s tendencies toward ecological crisis—but the positive programs emerging out of this camp represent little more than slogans or distant normative ideals. A grasp of capitalist crisis tendencies, after all, does not, by itself, produce an account of eco-socialist political transformation. This dissertation

² One prominent attempt to answer Lenin’s question from the eco-Marxist camp is Malm 2021.

takes up questions about which most eco-Marxists are silent: how might we become the kinds of people who are characterologically inclined to take on fossil capital? How might we reach beyond despair and disorientation and into radical political action?

In sum, we have a discursive impasse in contemporary environmentalism, both within the academy and without. If the old “middle-class” environmentalism embraced green habit formation at the expense of institutional critique, the contemporary environmentalist left disavows character talk at the expense of inquiry into radical political formation. Despite their differences, eco-democrats, new materialists, and eco-Marxists share a blindness to grounded, practical questions around character formation in a radical eco-politics.

A fundamental gambit of this dissertation is that one can best theorize radical political character formation by working through that which stands in the way of such transformation. Call to mind an individual who is concerned about climate change—who perhaps has even been directly affected by rising temperatures, rampant wildfires, and extreme weather events—but cannot seem to motivate herself to act.³ Why?

I emphasize three obstacles that commonly frustrate climate action in the 21st century: despair, disempowerment, and disorientation. Despair at the scope and severity of environmental degradation frequently inhibits political initiative (Lord et al. 2025; Osberg et al. 2023). “It may be impossible to seriously consider the reality of climate change for longer than ninety seconds,”

³ My approach is constrained in the sense that it relies on individuals having some minimal degree of environmental consciousness. The narratives of individual ethical formation I construct in the chapters will struggle to land among those with a resolutely anti-environmental politics. That said, as I argue in Chapter Three, sentimental affections for local environmental features are common; the work of this chapter is to demonstrate how such affections can be transformed into a more capacious eco-political commitment.

Jia Tolentino (2023) writes in the *New Yorker*, “without feeling depressed, angry, guilty, grief-stricken, or simply insane.” Despair frequently immobilizes those involved in climate activism, given their direct proximity to the tragedies of environmental politics. Meanwhile, structures of domination leave marginalized communities particularly vulnerable to the worst climate effects (Cole and Foster 2001). Environmental domination is not just a deplorable injustice—it also produces a felt sense of disempowerment, impeding bold climate action by limiting the imaginative horizons of oppressed individuals (Bullard 1994). Finally, climate change is disorienting. Scholars of climate psychology describe the rise of “solastalgia”: a sense of placelessness in familiar environs transformed by ecological destruction. Political action can feel almost impossible in a radically unstable terrain.

Each of these obstacles, left to fester, culminates in immobilization. Before them, we find ourselves *stuck*. Despair follows in the wake of horrifying climate events, which overload our psychic infrastructure and make *any* orientation toward future possibilities feel irresponsibly utopian. Disempowerment is the subjective experience of objective forms of domination; a social order that reserves social authority for the few leaves the many haunted by a sense of inefficacy. Any plan of action relies on a relatively stable picture of the world. Disorientation inhibits action by preventing such a world-picture from cohering in the first place.

This dissertation’s treatment of ecological character is grounded in the sense of being *stuck*. Here, my approach departs from eco-democrats, for whom ecological character is downstream of hypothetical sustainable institutions, as well as new materialists, for whom ecological character is a response to ontological claims about more-than-human animacy. I offer an account of political ethics that emerges from the muck, from the psychic morass in which many of us find ourselves.

Narratives, Formation, and Action

How could environmentalist scholars go about studying dispositional obstacles to climate action? One can imagine many valuable approaches. A psychologist might explore how clinical approaches to treating personal grief could be adapted for those experiencing climate despair. A sociologist or anthropologist could embed herself in an environmental justice organization, examining how activists motivate community members to break free of learned patterns of disempowerment. A media theorist might offer structural reforms to enable a less bewildering digital information environment.

My approach is different, grounded in a specifically *narrative* approach to the history of political thought. Sometimes, historians of political thought will present the positive claims of a thinker as bearing directly on a contemporary debate or dilemma. For example, I might say that Locke's argument about the permissibility of political resistance is well-justified and serves as a corrective to contemporary commentators who disavow extra-legal resistance to ICE. In this mode, the role of the theorist is to champion and channel the historical figure: I defend Locke's view and allow his words to flow through me in addressing a contemporary interlocutor. Portions of this dissertation take up this strategy. In the first part of Chapter One, for example, I argue that the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg wrote some essentially correct things about the relationship between individual virtue and institutional transformation, suggesting that her claims deserve a hearing in 21st-century debates.

But it is not just the *claims* of historical figures that interest me — it is also the *narratives* such figures conjure and embody. Indeed, another approach to the history of political thought in this dissertation involves the construction of narratives — stories about particular individuals —

that are intended to prompt ethical and political reflection. All the narratives I construct across the following chapters are about successful ethical formation. In each, a real or fictional individual finds themselves struggling with an obstacle to action — despair, disempowerment, or disorientation — but manages to overcome that obstacle by cultivating powerful virtues. For example, in Chapter One, I narrate Rosa Luxemburg’s cultivation of environmental virtues as a process of securing psychic survival while in prison, amid the most agonizing political despair of her life.

My tone in narrating these accounts of ethical formation may sometimes read as theoretically neutral, as though I am simply recounting rather than arguing. But do not be fooled. This is not the passive retelling of a series of pre-packaged stories; rather, it’s the reconstruction of historical materials into new narratives, of a particular genre (stories of ethical formation), pursuant to purposes that are my own.

Concerning genre: Any episode or figure in the history of political thought admits of multiple genres of narration. For example, Luxemburg’s cultivation of an environmental sensibility while in prison could easily be narrated in the tragic mode—after all, she was murdered shortly after her release from prison. I have opted for narrations of successful ethical formation for essentially pastoral reasons: I think such stories might be especially edifying in a disempowered dispositional environment. While the genre of these chapters borders on the romantic, my account of political ethics is far from utopian, especially in my emphasis on the burdened character of virtue in an unjust social order.⁴ In other words, I am doing theoretical work not just in interpreting narratives but also in the act of constructing them. What’s more, I will frequently break the fourth wall in recounting these tales, extracting ethical resources from

⁴ For a recent account of narrative, genre, and exemplarity that has been influential on my thinking, see: Terry 2025.

the narrative I've constructed that might be of use for contemporary environmental theory and practice. To return once more to Luxemburg: Chapter One tells the story of Rosa Luxemburg cultivating an environmental ethic as a way of working through despair; in telling this story, I attempt to form this ethic into something genuinely systematic, putting my account of Luxemburg's environmental sympathy into conversation with 21st-century environmental political theory. In this way, I bring together the two approaches I've described (narrative construction and argument-championing): I create a genre-specific narrative of Luxemburg's character formation, out of which I extract something like an ethical system, which I then proceed to champion.

A methodological emphasis on narrative is appropriate to the problem motivating this project. The dissertation is about individual political-ethical formation, and it is exceedingly difficult to speak of individual formation absent narrative. Formation, after all, describes a phenomenon that occurs across time; to speak of a movement from disempowerment to empowerment is to offer a story. Between stuckness and radical action lies trial, study, initiative, disappointment, failure, cultivation, and loss — these experiences serve as the narrative meat of this project. The dissertation is about virtue, and what use is there to commending a virtue without describing its cultivation? To demand that I simply *become* courageous is more likely to produce shame than bravery. To tell me a story about a person who faced trials akin to my own, but who nonetheless cultivated courage, is to give me something I can hold on to.

This approach is indebted to the later work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, especially his final book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (2016). In this text, MacIntyre essays lucidly on numerous theoretical dilemmas. But, in its final pages, the book pivots away from the form of standard philosophical

argumentation. MacIntyre concludes with four stories: narratives of exemplary individuals (Vasily Grossman, Sandra Day O'Connor, Denis Faul, and C.L.R. James) struggling to cultivate virtues that enabled the pursuit of goods to which they had committed their lives. Why? MacIntyre alleges that ours is a culture that makes it difficult to even imagine ourselves cultivating such praiseworthy virtues. After all, he writes:

The exploitative structures of both free market and state capitalism make it often difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve the goods of the workplace through excellent work. The political structures of modern states that exclude most citizens from participation in extended and informed deliberation on issues of crucial importance to their lives make it often difficult and sometimes impossible to achieve the goods of local community...So too the culture that entertains and distracts makes it often difficult and sometimes impossible to develop those imaginative powers that are of the first importance for living the life of the virtues (2016, 237).

It hardly needs remarking that, in this passage, MacIntyre sketches a predicament—featuring economic exploitation, political exclusion, and cultural bewilderment—that would produce much in the way of despair, disorientation, and disempowerment, even absent an existential threat like climate change. Even if we acknowledge the need to “live against the cultural grain,” thus transforming ourselves into “economic, political, and moral antagonists of the dominant order,” we lack the imaginative capacity to envision such ethical transformation taking place (238). We need stories, narratives of individual exemplars whose exemplarity emerges in response to dilemmas akin to our own. Storytelling, in other words, is a way of rekindling the ethical imagination amid the conflicts of modernity.

We can only learn how so to act, not from abstract theorizing, but in key part from the stories of those who in various very different modern social contexts have discovered what had to be done, if essential human goods were to be achieved, and what the virtues therefore required of them, so making themselves into critics and antagonists of the established order. I therefore need to proceed beyond my theoretical conclusions to give accounts of some exemplary lives (2016, 238).

In contemporary environmental politics, living against the grain means living against despair, disorientation, and disempowerment. Modern life, however, is a breeding ground for just those obstacles to action. But feelings of stuckness aren't new: one purpose of the narratives that populate this project is to insist that the reader is in good company. This dissertation thus proceeds through a treatment of several exemplary lives as they emerge out of immobilization, achieving new capacities for action through the cultivation of virtues.

Notes Toward an Eco-Socialist Civic Virtue

To speak of formation is very often to speak of virtue. Our formation as moral, ethical, and political agents occurs as we become—through trial, experimentation, correction, instruction, and other forms of learning—more skilled at being human. Virtue is the name most commonly given for such ethical skills of living. Virtues are stable excellences of character that enable, and sometimes constitute, goods of living (Aristotle 2002). Such excellences are constituted in a dynamic relationship between habit, disposition, and action. To be courageous, for example, is to be continuously disposed toward courage, such that courageous action becomes an instinct. Such an instinct only emerges out of habituation, out of prior courageous action, motivated in turn by a developing courageous disposition. Virtues, for me, describe excellent forms of activity which emerge when actions flow from stable dispositions, which come to evolve through habit, which are constituted by repeated patterns of action, which emerge from certain dispositions — and so on (Frank 2005). When we speak of an individual possessing a particular virtue, we're making a claim about the kinds of behavior we can reliably expect from them, even in unfamiliar or disagreeable circumstances. Emancipatory political movements are especially reliant on the virtues of their individual participants; they require individuals prepared

to endure in risky coordinated action, and who can make intelligent political judgments in an uncertain terrain.

My project develops an eco-socialist civic virtue: a virtue ethic that catalyzes commitment to eco-socialist transformation in the face of despair, disorientation, and disempowerment. As described, the dissertation is structured around three figures who embody (or conjure fictional individuals who embody) the overcoming of these obstacles to radical action through the cultivation of virtues. The specific virtues that populate this ethic emerge in the process of narrative construction. In each chapter, I narrate the cultivation of virtues — resilience, love, and vision, to anticipate a few — that enable the working through of an obstacle to action. But these virtues are not bound by the context of my historical figures. Rather, I frequently return to dilemmas facing 21st-century eco-political actors, highlighting ways in which these virtues speak wisely to contemporary environmental political theory and practice. Finally, in the conclusion, I cohere and systematize the virtues into a political ethic — an eco-socialist civic virtue — that catalyzes action, preserves radical commitment amid failure, and guides intelligent judgment.

The language of virtue has acquired significant baggage in democratic theory. After all, in its classical Aristotelian guise, virtue theory is eminently anti-pluralistic and inegalitarian. The possibility of achieving complete virtue, for Aristotle (2013), is simply inaccessible to women, manual laborers, and other subordinated groups. It is also attached to a monistic account of the human good that appears unfriendly to the democratic conviction that individuals should be free to make their own judgments about the life plan best suited to their flourishing.⁵ What's more, a

⁵ This ethical monism is reflected in Alasdair MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelianism. Indeed, my indebtedness to MacIntyre may surprise, given the commitments to hybrid virtue and the pragmatist tradition described below.

political community that valorizes particular virtues (martial courage, rhetorical virtuosity, etc.) may struggle to model equal respect for those who struggle to embody those virtues (Krause 2002). Might those theorizing the political ethics of democratic life be wise to leave the language of virtue behind?⁶

This would be too quick. After all, virtue is far from the only concept to be enlisted on behalf of social exclusion. The history of political thought is littered with anti-pluralistic and inegalitarian articulations of core concepts in democratic theory: justice, reciprocity, obligation, and even equality. Historical movements for racial equality and women's liberation were not bound by Platonic conceptions of justice; neither are we bound by the orthodox Aristotelian virtue theory. Indeed, as Melvin Rogers (2023) and other theorists indebted to the pragmatist tradition have argued, virtue comes to acquire a distinct importance in democratic societies. Democracy's promise is the free determination of conditions congenial to individual and collective flourishing, absent the arbitrary rule of princes, tycoons, or clerics (Allen 2023). Free cooperation demands virtues of forbearance, comity, and solidarity, whereas forms of social life founded on force produce vices of imperiousness and servility. Thus, democratic virtue describes

However, I contend that MacIntyre's insights into the centrality of narrative to ethical discourse, as well as his location of virtue development in communities of practice, can be affirmed without taking on board his neo-Aristotelianism *in toto*.

⁶ Democratic theorists inspired by Nietzsche and Foucault, such as William Connolly, offer an ethical grammar (for example, Connolly's "ethos of engagement") without the language of virtue. However, as Anderson (2006) has powerfully argued, the depth of such ethical engagement is undermined by these authors' suspicion of accounts of coherent selfhood and agency. More bluntly, a disavowal of the agential self inhibits inquiry into self-reflexive ethical formation over time.

the dispositions, patterns of interaction, and forms of activity that enable a common life free from arbitrary power.

A theory of the political ethics of eco-socialist transformation can profitably take up virtue language. But this will not be your grandfather's civic virtue. I speak here of political excellences that are (1) democratic, (2) socialist, (3) hybrid, (4) undomesticated, (5) burdened, and (6) attached to life's flourishing. As with the specific virtues that come to populate this ethic, these six characteristics emerge over the course of the chapters. Where Rosa Luxemburg helps us theorize the specifically socialist character of the ethic in Chapter One, for example, W.E.B DuBois orients us toward the burdened character of socialist virtues in Chapter Two. The character of my virtue theory emerges in process, as we watch the figures reach from immobilization to action. In this way, my approach reveals some partiality to pragmatist virtue theories, wherein virtue names those excellences individuals and communities cultivate to navigate problems they face in their environments (Kahn 2011).⁷ We cannot know in advance

⁷ An indebtedness to pragmatist theories of virtue may also seem out of step with some of my MacIntyrean commitment. Nevertheless, MacIntyre, despite his monism and suspicion of large-scale modern democratic institutions, which I reject, joins pragmatists in affirming the centrality of problem-solving in the development of political virtues. In his short (2008) essay, "How Aristotelianism Can Become Revolutionary," MacIntyre grounds political character formation in ground-up efforts to realize human goods in the face of community problems. He offers the example of community deliberation around the construction of a new school, which starts with a concrete desire of normal people — a desire for a new school to educate their children. Deliberation around this project leads to asking broader Aristotelian questions about human flourishing. However, the pursuit of human goods brings communities into conflict with "the systemic resistance of the representatives of the larger social and economic structures." When individuals and communities encounter such resistance, they experience a political education: They learn about the forces arrayed against them and the nature of the broader social order. They begin to

what kinds of virtues will enable praiseworthy action in the face of a particular problem; those conclusions are won only through an examination of grounded experience. That said, to situate the reader for the coming chapters, a very short description of each core characteristic is in order.

Democratic: To say that an eco-socialist civic virtue is democratic is to say that it is open to all, and open to all equally. It is also to insist that these virtues are not permanent standards, immune to political revision and contestation. Virtue, here, is contingent, emerging out of historically specific efforts by collectivities to secure the political conditions for shared flourishing. This is a specifically democratic account of political virtue because it contends that an emancipated environmental politics involves practices of deliberation, judgment, and justification — practices that constitute habits of democratic citizenship.

Socialist: Accounts of political virtue are partially defined by the institutions around which they are oriented. For example, neo-Roman accounts of civic virtue describe the excellences citizens ought to cultivate in order to ward against the corruption of republican state institutions (Frega 2019) (Pettit 1999). An eco-socialist civic virtue contends that capitalism, as a form of life, prevents human beings from freely and consciously deciding how to live alongside nature. Thus, its practitioners do not attach themselves to existing institutions of liberal capitalism, merely seeking their moderation in the light of sustainability. Rather, eco-socialist civic virtue is attached to those movements demanding emancipation from capitalist institutions and the free, democratic determination of the human-nature relationship.

experience a characterological shift where they start to define who they are politically. Such a discussion is not out of keeping with the pragmatist virtue theory of, say, W.E.B. DuBois, whom I discuss in Chapter 2. For a critical pragmatist engagement with MacIntyre's work, see Stout 2004.

Hybrid: Virtues very often emerge out of community traditions, through historical processes of argumentation and inquiry into the nature of the good life (MacIntyre 1981). In contemporary democratic politics, however, citizens encounter plural models of good living. Transnational movements for environmental justice, moreover, hope to hold together coalitions representing staggeringly diverse ethical and spiritual traditions. To say that the eco-socialist civic virtues are hybrid is to say that they emerge out of plural traditions of ethico-political practice. The figures who cultivate virtues of action in this dissertation do not consult a monistic tradition to which they have a near-organic connection — they encounter diverse models of living, creatively refashioning multiple ethical traditions into novel virtues appropriate to the problems they face.⁸

Undomesticated: The language of virtue is very often deployed to further social exclusion. Consider, for example, masculinist discourses holding that women should be excluded from significant arenas of social life because inclusion would be corrosive of feminine virtue. This is virtue discourse as *domesticating*, insisting on the immobilization of the other. Environmentalists sometimes risk a similarly domesticating approach to the natural world, holding that beloved ecological features are *for them*, and thus rightly subject to human mastery. Eco-socialist civic virtue is undomesticated because it refuses the subjection of the natural world to paternalistic control. It is also undomesticated because it is cultivated *on the move*, through practices of activist traveling across diverse social and ecological landscapes.⁹

Burdened: The eco-socialist civic virtues exist in a radically imperfect social order. To speak of virtues being cultivated in the midst of oppression and domination is fraught, as

⁸ It is on this point that my thinking is significantly more in keeping with the work of DuBois than that of MacIntyre.

⁹ This dual sense of ‘undomesticated’ (as anti-paternalistic and as mobile) is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

classical virtue theory promises that the exercise of the virtues is constitutive of flourishing (Aristotle 2013). As Tessman (2005) has argued, the virtues that tend to enable resistance to oppression — sensitivity to suffering, a kind of righteous anger at injustice, group loyalty — are not consistently linked to the flourishing of their bearer. The eco-socialist civic virtues are burdened in this way: they cannot promise complete happiness. Importantly, burdened virtues are, in fact, still virtues, despite their ambiguous connection to flourishing. We might still praise burdened virtues for several different reasons: (1) because they would be connected to flourishing in a better world, (2) because they permit moments of flourishing in a life that is otherwise rather painful, or (3) because they contribute to a world where widespread flourishing is more likely.

Attached to life's flourishing: Despite their burdened character, the eco-socialist civic virtues share an orientation to the flourishing of ecological life. The egalitarian flourishing of human life alongside organic life as a whole represents the ethical horizon toward which these virtues aspire. Each chapter of this dissertation features utopian glimmers of such flourishing, glimmers whose aspirational appeal relieves some of the burdens of ethical formation in an unjust social order. Of course, visions of ecological flourishing are plural. Contestation over the meaning of flourishing is a core democratic practice of eco-socialist political formations. Indeed, contestation over the meaning of this shared aspirational horizon is partially *constitutive* of radical environmentalist political formations.¹⁰ Despite their differences, however, my figures tend to imagine ecological flourishing in, to borrow language from Chris Cuomo (1998),

¹⁰ This description is similar to Wallach's (2018) account in *Democracy and Goodness*, where he argues that historical contestation over aspirational ideals in democratic ethics (human rights, legitimacy, etc) is constitutive of democratic polities.

naturalistic but non-teleological terms. That is, my figures ground their thinking about the demands of ecological flourishing in “facts about people, societies, animals, and ecosystemic processes” while at the same time rejecting the assumption that “there exists a determinate final end to which things and processes inevitably aim” (1997, 80). A naturalistic but non-teleological perspective admits plural perspectives on the demands of flourishing — it avoids the political closure associated with strong teleology — while urging us to attend to the complex biological and social needs of human and non-human life.

An Outline of the Chapters

To recapitulate: this project is grounded in a frustration with radical environmental discourses that dismiss questions of individual character, as well as a practical fear concerning dispositional impediments to environmental action. The dissertation endeavors to offer an account of political virtue that enables radical environmental action in the face of despair, disempowerment, and disorientation. Methodologically, I engage in a narrative approach to the history of political thought, constructing stories of individuals who reach beyond immobilization to embody political excellence. In the process of storytelling, I regularly break the fourth wall, extracting ethical resources out of these narratives, which I proceed to champion. As specific virtues emerge over the course of the chapters, so does a model of virtue theory, with several core characteristics (virtue as democratic, socialist, hybrid, undomesticated, burdened, and attached to life’s flourishing). In the conclusion, I cohere the virtues into a political ethic — an eco-socialist civic virtue — that catalyzes action, preserves commitment in the midst of failure, and grounds intelligent political judgment.

In Chapter One, I enlist Rosa Luxemburg as a theorist of revolutionary resilience in the face of agonizing political despair. During a long imprisonment for anti-war agitation, Luxemburg developed an ecological ethic to maintain her sanity amid catastrophe. This ethic combines practices of cool-headed analysis when faced with disasters that no single individual can control, alongside the cultivation of intimate relationships with non-human creatures. Luxemburg achieved serenity through environmental sympathy — developing bonds even with the weeds and pests that populated her prison yard. Luxemburgian sympathy is an essential resource for contemporary environmental actors. For such actors, sympathy is not merely an effort to seek shelter from the storm of world events — it’s modeling their own vision of a different mode of relating to the natural world. Luxemburg’s environmental ethic helped her survive, culminating in a virtue of revolutionary resilience: a resilience that permitted her to maintain her commitment to class emancipation. What’s more, I read Luxemburg’s articulation of the ‘socialist civic virtues’ against a recent attempt in political theory — Melissa Lane’s (2012) text *Eco-Republic* — to theorize the relationship between individual character and environmental sustainability. Pitting Luxemburg against Lane highlights the tensions between individual eco-virtue, traditionally understood, and the capitalist mode of production, occasioning my development of a specifically socialist account of environmental virtue.

In Chapter Two, I develop an account of ecological transformation against disempowerments borne of environmental racism with the help of sociologist and philosopher W.E.B. DuBois. A growing body of scholarship elevates DuBois as an early diagnostician of environmental injustice. This chapter suggests that DuBois offers us more than diagnosis. I argue that DuBois uses his first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), to work through problems of disempowerment and domination in inhibiting oppressed individuals from imagining utopian

possibilities. I argue that *Quest* presents an interlocking system of virtues — vision, devotion, self-possession — that links racial solidarity, a capacity to reimagine one’s socio-ecological form of life, and an ability to metabolize the emotions occasioned by radical struggle in a way that enables self-giving action. This chapter reveals a DuBois overlooked by the extant scholarship: a DuBois whose commitment to economic democracy is rooted in environmental concern, and whose attention to classical questions concerning the relationship between city and soul is motivated by an eco-democratic politics. It also reveals a model of political virtue that is sensitive to the burdens of resistance, as well as the hybrid experience of ethical formation in pluralistic societies.

Chapter Three develops a virtue of ecological love that arises out of disorientation. Ours is an era characterized by unpredictable environmental phenomena and the collapse of master stories that have guided political and social life for centuries. From the ethnographies of anthropologist Anna Tsing, I narrate the cultivation of Tsing’s own love, a virtue that catalyzes environmental engagement in the midst of disorientation. This form of environmental love—which I call ‘undomesticated love’—reacts to the indeterminacy of our landscapes with pleasure rather than disavowal, generating political collaborations across cultural and species divides. What’s more, I argue through a reading of Tsing’s earlier work on Indonesian environmentalism that the cultivation of undomesticated love readies individuals for political insurgence. After all, undomesticated love is a school of vision and collaboration; it prepares us for the disorientations of political struggle. On this, emancipatory eco-politics is a work of love, and ecological love is a matter of collective action. Out of my narration of Tsing emerges an account of ecological virtue as *undomesticated* — refusing the subjection of nature to paternalistic control, cultivated on the move, through practices of landscape wandering.

In the conclusion, I cohere the insights of the narrative chapters into an eco-socialist political ethic. An ethic is a mode of action and conduct, a way of relating to the world and one's fellows. It's a system of attachments, practices, and affects — that is, virtues — that enable individuals to pursue a particular life project. An eco-socialist civic virtue is a distinctly political ethic, offering resources to mobilize action, preserve agency, and guide judgment.¹¹ I offer three essays on these themes, offering a positive account of eco-socialist political ethics, in conversation with the exemplars that populate the chapters. I conclude on the topic of imagination, sketching a vision that joins emancipatory struggle with the flourishing of organic life.

¹¹ I will suggest that this tripartite division between mobilization, preservation, and judgment describes what we should expect from a political ethic. Indeed, I'll argue that this distinction roughly maps onto the functions of the political ethic Weber (1946) develops in 'Politics As a Vocation.'

CHAPTER ONE

AFTER DESPAIR: SOCIALIST VIRTUE, RADICAL RESILIENCE IN ROSA LUXEMBURG

This chapter contains an argument about virtue and capitalism, and a story about political despair. As I discussed in the introduction, there has been no shortage of left-wing political discourses that criticize the traditional environmentalist emphasis on individual virtue. For thinkers on the eco-socialist left, “middle-class” environmentalism is politically problematic because it poorly theorizes the relationship between individual character and institutional transformation. Individual virtue — especially the virtue exhibited through “green” consumption habits — cannot reverse the capitalist processes and institutions destroying the planet. This chapter makes a version of that left-wing argument, ultimately suggesting that an individual commitment to green virtue necessitates an anti-capitalist politics. At the same time, a commitment to structural critique does not obviate the need for characterological inquiry. After all, if we accept the claim that institutional transformation is necessary, several character questions immediately arise: what kinds of people would be needed to initiate such a transformation? How could we imagine the formation of such political actors?

This chapter begins the work of answering those questions. It lays the groundwork for an account of environmental virtue appropriate to a radical eco-politics, explicating the specifically socialist character of an eco-socialist civic virtue. My primary thought partner here is the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. Her account of political virtue — what she calls the ‘socialist civic virtues’ — names the excellences individuals display when they agitate for institutional transformation against immense headwinds, amid the political paradoxes that characterize emancipatory struggles. That is, Luxemburg gives us a way of talking virtue that is sensitive to the institutional dimensions of human domination, as well as the characterological

dimensions of institutional transformation. Moreover, Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues are particularly appropriate to our 21st-century eco-political conjuncture. This virtue theory highlights structural obstacles to the achievement of eco-democracy, elevates the intrinsic good of democratic engagement with the natural world, reveals the immoderate virtues necessary for a politics of environmental moderation, and offers a rhetorical model for political mobilization in disempowered times like our own. Ultimately, I champion the socialist civic virtues as a model of revolutionary political ethics appropriate to the challenge of structural transformation in the face of catastrophic climate change.

I introduce my environmental reading of Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues through an immanent critique of political theorist Melissa Lane's (2012) book *Eco-Republic: What the Ancients Can Teach Us about Ethics, Virtue, and Sustainable Living*. I turn to this text because its project resembles my own: to rethink the relationship between macro-structure and individual character in environmental politics. However, Lane's vision is ultimately self-contradictory, neglecting the structural-political demands occasioned by individual environmental virtue. Plainly, I spend a great deal of time with Lane because her account is deficient in ways that accentuate the advantages of Luxemburg's ethic. My reading of Lane reveals the ways in which individual ecological virtue requires an anti-capitalist politics. In turn, Rosa Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues help us to think about the place of individual virtue and character in anti-capitalist struggle.

However, the socialist civic virtues, while generative for a radical environmental politics, represent an essentially humanist ideal. They orient us toward the free stewardship of our common life alongside nature, but they have little to say about how human beings ought to relate to the more-than-human.

In the second part of the chapter, I turn to Luxemburg's nature writings, especially a series of letters written during a long prison sentence near the end of her life. From these writings, I narrate a story about Luxemburg's own political despair and the environmental sensibility she cultivated to maintain psychic resolve amid catastrophe, following the ascent of official German socialism to the barbarism of World War I. Indeed, it is only in view of Luxemburg's very human struggles that her life can be instructive for us today. After all, her sophisticated and gorgeous environmental sensibility grew out of the personal agonies that haunt any radical life. Her environmental writings are more than a historical curio: they're a treasure. Together, they present an ecological ethic that teaches us how to cultivate sympathetic relationships with nonhuman creatures — an ethic that helped secure her own survival amid despair.

Through the process of narration, I also aim to cohere the insights peppered throughout Luxemburg's unsystematic reflections on the natural world into two environmental 'ethics': Luxemburgian sympathy and the "Mensch Ethic," which I place in conversation with contemporary environmental political theory. Luxemburgian sympathy contributes richly to feminist and ecofeminist care theories (De La Bellacasa 2017; Fisher and Tronto 2003; Donovan 1996), describing a matrix of practices and habits that can enable attentive care relationships across species divides. Luxemburg's Mensch Ethic encompasses the strategies Luxemburg employed, amid personal and political catastrophe, to keep her head. This ethic, with its location of serenity in intimate attachments to parts of the natural world, is, I suggest, a particularly promising model of revolutionary resilience for contemporary environmental radicals and contributes to recent scholarship on the virtues possible under catastrophic political and social conditions (Lear 2006; Williston 2012; Cassegård 2018; Flores and Rousse 2016; Thaler 2024).

Finally, I suggest that Luxemburg's most famous prison letter — depicting the brutal beating of a buffalo — offers a powerful theory of the institutional and affective origins of ecological *vice*, one which is sensitive to the interpenetration of human and environmental domination.

Taken together, Luxemburg's life and work models a politics that joins a commitment to human emancipation with a desire for the flourishing of all organic life. Out of my narration and argumentation emerges a picture of individual virtue — courageously devoted to the project of social emancipation, resilient in the face of catastrophic change, and motivated by an overflowing affection for life's abundance — that may begin to inspire the transformative change our moment demands.

A Luxemburgian Critique of Lane's Eco-Virtue

In *Eco-Republic*, Melissa Lane rightly insists that we possess an impoverished account of the relationship between city and soul, between individual character and the character of our institutions and societies. A better account, which she thinks we can glean through a reading of Platonic virtue, should temper two dispositions — apathy and despair — that seem consistently to hold individuals back from initiating meaningful climate action. For Lane, both the apathetic ecological subject and the despairing one think that our individual actions have little effect on the world. As Lane puts it, “We see ourselves as impotent (nothing we do makes a real difference) and therefore innocent (our emissions, in fact all of our actions are irrelevant to the real problem)” (2012, 56). Either we sustain our ecologically degrading practices, insisting that ecological devastation is not our problem, or we are paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of the crisis. However, because of her capitalist commitments, Lane ultimately fails to grasp the institutional obstacles to the individual realization of ecological virtue. In critiquing Lane, I turn

to Rosa Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues, which more aptly describe the relationship between structure and character in an emancipatory politics. For Lane, the virtue of moderation secures the long-term sustainability of liberal capitalist institutions. For Luxemburg, virtue names the excellences individuals display when they reach toward social emancipation and institutional transformation against immense dispositional headwinds amid the paradoxes that characterize political life. The signature Luxemburgian virtues are the immoderate virtues of struggle, empowering individuals to transform their form of life while recognizing the myriad ways social unfreedom habituates us into inaction.

What theoretical work does the language of virtue do for Lane? The problem from which Lane starts is environmental political inertia, which, she suggests, is ultimately a problem of imagination. After all, solutions objectively exist to our ecological dilemmas, but we cannot imagine sustainable ecological transformation actually taking place. We are faced with a broken imagination (a failure to conceive of a more ecological form of life) as well as a broken ethos (insufficiently sustainable motivations and practices organize our everyday lives). One of the primary reasons our ethos is unsustainable, Lane argues, is that we assume that any sustainable initiative we take will be ultimately negligible to the scale of the problem; thus, we do not act. This is where virtue thinking enters the picture. Virtue thinking contends that all our actions contribute to a broader social ethos. When an individual acts in a sustainable way, she "embodies a new outlook" and thus represents "a node in a new political imagination, the first step to creating a new social ethos" (2012, 64). As individuals act in a more virtuous manner, they start to see the world differently, reimagining the horizon of possibility in a way that might catch on with one's neighbors and fellow citizens.

Lane also argues that virtue can overcome motivational obstacles to individual initiative by offering the intrinsic reward of excellence. Environmental politics is a realm bogged down by reductive conceptions of self-interest. Individuals wonder whether joining a climate activist organization will benefit them if such organizations are uncertain to be successful. Virtue offers a motivational structure, a way of thinking about what we ought to do, beyond utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. We might, Lane suggests, act in an environmentally conscious way because we desire to become ecologically virtuous individuals. Virtue, in other words, may move us to action because it represents an end in itself: for Lane, it does so because a life of virtue is a healthy life (2012, 101). That is, the intrinsic good that virtue produces is not so much flourishing but a prior good of health. Health, for Lane, is a kind of sibling concept to sustainability. Both health and sustainability are goods that restrain our activities from excess and permit their long-term viability. In the context of environmental politics, virtue tells us that individuals ought to demand more of themselves than passive participation in ecological harm.

Finally, Lane offers a sophisticated account of the self-reinforcing character of Platonic virtue, and how that character makes virtue a particularly valuable resource for theorizing sustainability. Virtuous action, for Plato, issues from a soul predisposed to act virtuously, and virtuous activity likewise inclines the soul to greater virtue. Thus, Lane concludes, “the virtue of the *Republic* is sustainable virtue.” It is sustainable on the level of the individual (because virtuous action habituates individuals to future virtuous action) and the level of the polity (because the virtue of the subject contributes to the virtue of the city, which contributes in turn to the virtue of subjects). Faced with the challenge of sustainability, Lane recommends a concept, virtue, that might lend environmental protection itself a self-reproducing character (2012, 125-26).

As I will show, however, Lane's central political project (moderating excess so as to save the capitalist mode of production from itself) is in tension with her account of virtuous ecological politics (democratic citizens acting as "co-producers" of the good of sustainability through practices of individual and collective self-limitation). Lane turns to virtue because she thinks that virtuous individuals can transform the ethos of capitalist institutions and practices in an ecologically sustainable direction. But, as we will see, the capitalist mode in its very logic frustrates the capacities of virtuous individuals to co-produce sustainability as democratic equals.

A central good of Lane's eco-virtue is sustainability. For Lane, sustainability is about tempering a hegemonic form of life — liberal capitalism — such that it respects planetary limits. Virtuous individuals are tasked with honoring those planetary limits in their everyday activities (2012, 20).¹² The central virtue she commends is moderation, which she describes as existing at the "psychic core" of the other critical virtues (justice, wisdom, courage), protecting those virtues from distortion and vice. "Without [moderation], none of the other virtues are possible," Lane writes (114). The central contrasting vice is *pleonexia*, a kind of overreaching, excessive greed for more than one's share (32). Lane's critique of contemporary capitalism is that it is largely characterized by *pleonexia*; economic practices oriented around satisfying greed have given us habits that leave us dispositionally disinclined to consider the whole good of our polities. But we

¹² It is not entirely clear in what sense such planetary limits are, in fact, limits. There are physical limits to my activities (I cannot, without technological assistance, jump 100 yards). But many of the planetary limits Lane has in mind (a ceiling on allowable carbon emissions, for example) have a different character: they are not absolute limits to human endeavor because *we are already bypassing them*. To put it more bluntly, these are limits that are actually an *argument* about what would be wise for human beings to do. We will see that Luxemburg has a more satisfying account of human self-limitation.

can preserve much of what is admirable about capitalism so long as we develop the virtues that enable us to subject our appetites to rational limits (40). Structure and character come together under the ambit of virtue, which is now precisely that which permits the sustainable reproduction of liberal capitalist institutions alongside liberal capitalist subjects.

So what must be done? In her chapter sketching a “(partly) Platonic political project,” Lane argues that every individual has two primary responsibilities: to (1) cultivate the virtue of moderation in order to limit their consumption, and (2) reinterpret our particular social roles in light of our understanding of the “overall good” of sustainability. This second requirement leads us to imagine ourselves as “co-producers” of that good, as “citizens of eco-republics, who share a common good and need to take responsibility for producing it in common” (2012, 44). To summarize: individuals have a responsibility to act as co-producers of sustainability, a good that subjects human activity to planetary limits, and to exhibit the virtue of intelligent moderation, a virtue animated by rational self-limitation.

Lane offers one concrete example of an individual who takes responsibility in this way: the carpet CEO Ray C. Anderson. Anderson, in her telling, experienced something akin to an ecological conversion, deciding to make his company a more sustainable business. Lane describes this story as an “individual and corporate odyssey,” wherein one person was able to preserve but reformulate the aim that originally motivated his social role — the accumulation of value — in the light of sustainability. Anderson, by virtue of his role as an owner of a capitalist firm, is intimately involved in decisions contributing to the human-nature relationship. He sources materials that are produced in a certain way, authorizes manufacturing processes that handle waste in a certain way, and so on. Per Lane, he has now experienced a conversion that renders him a “co-producer” of sustainability (2012, 127). But could an entry-level employee of

Anderson's company reinterpret her social role in a similar manner? It's hard to imagine how. Low-level employees within manufacturing firms frequently engage with the natural world, but, by following directives from the Andersons of the world, they do so according to a will that is not their own. Anderson has some ability to engage in virtuous practices of self-limitation by virtue of a social role he occupies; his employee, in her everyday practices of production, finds herself separated from the authority to limit herself. Virtuous co-production appears out of her grasp.

Anderson himself also faces constraints: Owners of capitalist firms can only reinterpret their roles to the extent that the demands of sustainability are consistent with the compulsion to accumulate surplus value; a sustainable capitalist who does not accumulate surplus value is, properly speaking, no longer a capitalist.¹³ The carpet employee, if unsuccessful in convincing an executive to transform his business practices, might then turn to the other of Lane's recommendations: that she cultivate the virtue of moderation and temper her consumption. But even there, her capacity for free action is limited; as consumers, we constantly enter into complicity with environmentally destructive systems whose true character escapes our capacity for control.¹⁴ Our hypothetical carpet employee may admirably resolve to limit the frequency with which she, say, flips on lights in her apartment, while understanding that fully escaping complicity as a consumer in environmental destruction is unfeasible. Such a praiseworthy display of moderation might, as Lane suggests, serve as an "exemplar" for others. Lane offers this possibility as a measure of hope for those non-CEO readers who "find the Anderson story

¹³ With this line of argumentation, I am thinking alongside Hägglund's (2020) account of the relationship between value theory and capitalist accumulation.

¹⁴ See, for example, Jamieson and Di Paolo 2017.

impressive but too remote to be inspiring.” She is, of course, right to insist that individual initiative is unpredictable in its effects, and that “doing nothing to change the course of business as usual” is certain to fail (2012, 181-82). But our carpet employee ought to be forgiven if this bit of parting wisdom leaves a sour taste in her mouth. After all, Lane is offering a program for a *democratic* eco-politics. It should be difficult for (eco) democrats to accept a social order in which some individuals occupy roles that permit them to make direct, large-scale decisions (constrained, nonetheless, by the compulsion to accumulate value) about how human beings make productive use of nature, while other individuals are left with the lovely thought that their behavior as consumers may have cascading effects. Frustrated by her lack of latitude as a consumer, our carpet employee might find herself engaging in agitation for greater authority over social production — which may represent agitation for greater participation in ecological virtue.

If we are democrats, and if we accept the responsibility of self-limitation, we have a prior responsibility to agitate for the emancipation of social reproduction, seizing the authority necessary to freely make moderate and wise decisions together that guide our interactions with the natural world. To summarize: accepting the demands of eco-republican virtue *according to Lane* requires subjecting productive activity to the democratic principle.

Through this reading of Lane, we discovered that the demands of ecological virtue thrust us into emancipatory political struggle. The work of socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg now helps us see that an emancipatory politics cannot dispense with questions of virtue. Indeed, in the months preceding her murder at the hands of a proto-Nazi paramilitary, Luxemburg engaged in a recovery of the language of civic virtue precisely for revolutionary political struggle. Subjecting productive activity to the democratic principle — the centerpiece of Luxemburg’s socialist politics — is, after all, easier said than done. Capitalist social relations, in

Luxemburg's view, habituate individuals in a way that frustrates democratic practice. She worries that workers, who occupy the role of a "living machine" while on the job, will tend to acquire habits (obedience, servility) that are corrosive to any democratic form of life (2004 [1918b], 346). Industrialists and bosses, meanwhile, acquire equally corrosive habits of imperiousness and insensitivity. Thus, for Luxemburg, the realization of socialism requires not just some institutional reorganization but "a complete spiritual transformation in the masses" (Luxemburg 2004 [1918a], 306). Only new models of organization sustained by new habits and dispositions — new virtues — could hope to overcome the immense opposition any anti-capitalist project will inspire. My immanent critique of Lane took us from virtue to politics, while Luxemburg helps us to see that we must once again return to a kind of virtue, which she describes as the 'socialist civic virtues':

From dead machines assigned their place in production by capital, the proletarian masses must learn to transform themselves into the free and independent directors of this process... They have to develop industriousness without the capitalist whip, the highest productivity without slavedrivers... The highest idealism in the interest of the collectivity, the strictest self-discipline, the truest public spirit of the masses are the moral foundations of socialist society just as stupidity, egotism, and corruption are the moral foundations of capitalist society. All these socialist civic virtues, together with the knowledge and skills necessary to direct socialist enterprises, can be won by the mass of workers only through their own activity... The socialization of society can be achieved only through tenacious, tireless struggle by the working mass... The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself (2004 [1918c], 351).

This rich passage, however, leaves us with a puzzle in determining the place of virtue between macro-structures and individual character. It initially appears that Luxemburg offers the socialist civic virtues as the solution to a problem: the fact that the capitalist form of life creates vices (stupidity, egotism, corruption) that inhibit the socialist project. On this reading, virtue provides a rather empty solution: the socialist project would be advanced if individuals possessed socialist civic virtues. But this is not much of a solution at all. After all, what could possibly

habituate ordinary people into these remarkable virtues — tenacity, idealism, industriousness — given the realities of capitalist habituation? We immediately run into the fundamental problem once again. This is because what we have on our hands is not so much a problem as a paradox, which we might call the paradox of socialist transformation: the achievement of socialist-democratic institutions requires individuals with socialist civic virtues, but it's difficult to imagine the cultivation of such individuals absent the right institutions. What role has virtue in this vicious cycle?

One cannot escape the paradox of socialist transformation with any theoretical masterstroke. And yet, throughout history, remarkable individuals, stuck in the middle of the paradoxes that characterize political life, continue to reach forward toward deeper emancipation. The socialist civic virtues give us a name for the capacities individuals cultivate in the face of massive dispositional headwinds. They exist in the space of becoming, between apathy and despair, and the promise of human emancipation.¹⁵ Luxemburg's is a virtue theory that grasps the structural-institutional dimensions of human life and human domination. Virtue is not an alternative to institutional transformation; rather, the socialist civic virtues are oriented toward transformation, and, in many cases, they are cultivated in counter-hegemonic institutions. Luxemburg, perhaps more than any major interpreter of the tradition, adheres to the Marxist belief that individuals acquire the capabilities necessary for freedom through the struggle for freedom itself. That said, Luxemburg is not an anti-institutional thinker: she commends counter-hegemonic institutions, associated with social democratic parties, that can provide a robust associational and educational life for oppressed individuals (see Muldoon 2020 for useful historical background on counter-hegemonic institutions in Luxemburg's context). The creation

¹⁵ I'm deeply indebted to Ayantu Israel-Megerssa for conversation on this point.

of counter-hegemonic institutions is one of the forms of action we undertake amid paradox. Such institutions, while limited in their capacity to fully inculcate socialist civic virtues, can serve pedagogical and cultural purposes pursuant to socialist transformation, cultivating the ground of revolutionary overcoming that might issue in future action. Luxemburg understands that structures of domination can shape our sensibilities in ways that inhibit emancipatory action. But, as a Marxist, she is attentive to the ways in which structures of domination produce elements that, if activated in the right way, by individuals with the right virtues, can further human emancipation.

The contradictions in Melissa Lane's *Eco-Republic* revealed the ways in which individual ecological virtue requires an anti-capitalist politics. In turn, Rosa Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues help us to think about the place of virtue in such a politics. The socialist civic virtues are excellences individuals cultivate amid paradox, oriented toward institutional transformation in the face of dispositional and practical obstacles. This way of thinking about virtue is, I think, generalizable across emancipatory struggles. However, I hope to demonstrate that Luxemburg's virtue theory is particularly generative for theorizing a radical response to climate change and catastrophic ecological degradation. It is to the ecological upshot of the socialist civic virtues that I turn next.

An Environmental Reading of the Socialist Civic Virtues

Rosa Luxemburg is a titanic figure in the history of the Marxist left. Her work has been invoked in debates about the function of primitive accumulation, the role of the party in socialist

strategy, and the nature of action.¹⁶ Less frequently, however, has she been taken up by environmental political theorists. I hope to demonstrate that her thought can contribute to a vital account of eco-democracy. In this section, I offer a reading of Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues in the light of our environmental political conjuncture. I argue that her account of virtue elevates the intrinsic political-ethical value of engagement with the natural world, demonstrates that any politics of environmental moderation requires immoderate virtues of struggle, and models a rhetorical strategy for mobilization in our moment of political disempowerment.

In her presentation of the socialist civic virtues, Luxemburg's critique of capitalism is rooted in the democratic principle. Capitalism, she insists, structurally excludes workers from major decisions about how society reproduces itself. Workers spend the majority of their waking hours on the job, in the role of "dead machines," where they lack meaningful authority over their own activity. Luxemburg describes this state of affairs vividly: "At the moment production in every enterprise is conducted by individual capitalists on their own initiative. What-and in which way-is to be produced, where, when and how the produced goods are to be sold is determined by the industrialist" (2004 [1918b], 346). This critique of capitalism becomes especially powerful in our era of rampant ecological destruction. The task facing democratic subjects in the Anthropocene is to contribute to a reorganization of how human beings relate to the natural world. We live in societies where a great deal of the human-nature relationship occurs under the ambit of production, yet prevailing practices of production are very often ecologically destructive. But, as Luxemburg demonstrates, non-capitalists (and, in certain ways, capitalists, as well) are structurally excluded from a great deal of productive decision-making, frustrating their

¹⁶ See: Dunayevskaya 1946; Harvey 2005; Vollrath 1973; Lukacs 1972; Laclau and Mouffe 1985 (chap. 1); and Geras 1994

ability to create a new relationship with nature. Thus, those who share ecological and democratic commitments ought to agitate for the subjection of production to the democratic principle.

A developed literature on eco-democracy urges democratic subjects to incorporate the interests of the more-than-human into political decision-making (Eckersley 1992; Goodin 1996; Schlosberg et al. 2019; Smith 2003; Lepori 2019). Luxemburg helps us to see the structural obstacles the capitalist mode of production poses to the mere consideration of such proposals. Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues orient us toward the anti-democratic structure of production; any account of eco-democracy that neglects the problem of production is essentially incomplete.

Moreover, taking the socialist civic virtues seriously would orient any environmental politics around the good of democracy. The good underlying Lane's virtue ethic is sustainability or health; the aim of Lane's account of sustainability is to preserve, in large part, the existing institutions of liberal capitalism, ensuring that they can extend into the future without risking ecological collapse (2012, 21). It is precisely this type of preservationist ethic that Luxemburg hoped to transcend. "Rather than directing civic virtue towards the preservation of state institutions," Muldoon (2020) writes, "Luxemburg reinterpreted these virtues as the habits of discipline, political judgment, self-activity, and solidarity necessary for social transformation" (157). Ultimately, I suggest that the good underlying the socialist civic virtues is a deep vision of democracy. Human beings ought to decide how they want to live with their fellow human beings, and they ought to decide how they want to engage the natural world. The democratic stewardship of our common life is good; we would admire the achievement of a community that makes "the entire political and economic life its own life" (Luxemburg 2004 [1918c], 350). In her critique of the Bolsheviks, Luxemburg insists, again and again, that her vision — which she calls Socialist Democracy — is not the choice of socialism over and against democratic

principles, but rather the completion of the democratic idea through the abolition of anti-democratic capitalist structures and the rule of “the most unlimited, the broadest democracy and public opinion” (Luxemburg 2004 [1918a], 305). The socialist civic virtues certainly do not go so far as to elevate the more-than-human as peers in democratic deliberation (though, as we will see, Luxemburg has a great deal to say elsewhere about how human beings ought to relate to nature). But they have the admirable effect of elevating the intrinsic ethical-political value of democratic engagement with the natural world.

As we have seen, the central ecological virtue for Lane is moderation. She is not alone in this: excellences such as moderation, humility, and restraint are frequently praised in the scholarship on environmental ethics (Cafaro and Sandler 2011). However, Luxemburg can illuminate the ways in which any genuine politics of environmental moderation requires virtues of struggle that are essentially immoderate. Luxemburg does, in fact, offer us a version of moderation in the form of self-discipline: the “strictest self-discipline,” she insists, is one of “the moral foundations of socialist society” (2004 [1918c], 351). But this is a different sort of moderation than we get in Lane’s eco-virtue ethic. For Lane, the self-moderating individual commits to sustaining liberal capitalist institutions by translating the demands of “planetary limits” into self-limiting action.¹⁷ She has acted freely in the sense that nobody has forced her into moderation; however, the substantive requirements of self-moderation exist outside the realm of free choice. Luxemburg’s “self-discipline” is different because of her emphasis on autonomy: virtuous workers become the “free and independent directors” of economic and social

¹⁷ As discussed in note 11, I question whether it’s possible to envision a clean translation of a posited planetary limit into a requirement for individual or collective self-limitation.

life.¹⁸ Thus, self-discipline should exist only in the service of a project that has been freely chosen.

Lane suggests that individuals, by cultivating the virtue of moderation, can contribute to a broader ethos of moderation that might come to guide broader environmental practices. Here, individual self-moderation “trickles up” into macro-level moderation. But, as we have seen, individuals face obstacles to self-moderation, and individual virtuous *action*, due to structural exclusions in our form of life, does not necessarily contribute to macro-practices that exhibit those same virtues. Participants in radical environmental struggles know this well. Think, for example, of what Naomi Klein (2014) calls “Blockadia”, which she describes as a “roving transnational conflict zone [...] where ‘regular’ people are stepping in” to disrupt the fossil fuel supply chain (254). Individual denizens of Blockadia are seeking to moderate macro-environmental practices. However, the activity of Blockadians is very often immoderate.

Indeed, Blockadian and other radical environmental activists, in their effort to moderate macro-environmental practices, often exhibit capacities and dispositions that resemble

¹⁸ It is worth offering here a brief schematic for how Luxemburg understands some central concepts that will appear throughout this discussion. For Luxemburg, the concepts of freedom and democracy interpenetrate. Freedom, throughout her writings, appears in the activity of self-determination or self-rule, on both the individual and collective levels. Her abiding concern with self-emancipation coincides with the self-determination concept: workers must be the ones to free themselves because freedom is precisely the activity of forming one’s own fate, rather than being subject to the dictates of a boss or the impersonal domination of capital. Democracy is nothing more than the exercise of freedom within a collectivity and on the basis of equality. What Luxemburg calls socialist democracy is preferable to bourgeois democracy because it extends the democratic principle — oriented around the self-determining activity of all — into the economy and society as a whole. The richest discussions of these issues come in Luxemburg’s “The Russian Revolution” (2004 [1918a]) and “The Mass Strike” (2004 [1906]).

Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues: tenacity, idealism, a radical orientation toward the collective. These immoderate virtues of struggle become necessary because of the reality of massive opposition to the structural transformations that are the condition of possibility for collective self-moderation. The social science literature on grassroots efforts to interrupt environmental exploitation highlights the persistence of powerful opposition as well as the persistence of failure.¹⁹ Overcoming such resistance requires developing collective powers that do not yet exist; developing the power capable of taking on opposition requires the development of individual capacities that include a number of Luxemburgian virtues beyond moderation. An ecological reading of the socialist civic virtues reveals something essential: any politics seeking to genuinely moderate environmental practices cannot help but be radical.

However, some contemporary theorists of environmental politics may object to the socialist civic virtues on practical-anthropological grounds: does Luxemburg offer a picture of revolutionary heroism that simply sets too high of a bar, resting on implausible assumptions about human capacities? After all, Luxemburg calls not just for a general orientation toward the good of the collective but the "truest public spirit," not just a vague commitment to one's principles but the "highest idealism" ([1918c], 351). Elizabeth Anker (2023) criticizes environmental radicals who call us to "inspiring courage, exceptional selflessness" as offering a vision that may seem "too unapproachable, too pure, too righteous," while trafficking in "current standards of acceptability that are narrow and oppressive" (8). Anker offers a different vision, which she calls "We Go Low," that does not require exemplary virtue but "[constructs] freedom, equality and justice in relation to degraded actions [and] discomfiting political conditions," while

¹⁹ See Bebbington and Bury 2013; Martinez-Alier 2014; Spalding 2018; and Riofrancos 2020.

still advocating for a world that cares “deeply about life and equal flourishing of all people” (9).

How might a defender of Luxemburg’s socialist civic virtues, in all their loftiness, respond?

First, there is a tension between Anker’s aversion to moralism and her account of an eco-political formation with a deep commitment to “life and equal flourishing,” whose members are “invested in repairing the planet” (despite, Anker tells us, not being “morally virtuous”) (11). But in fact, it is *profoundly* virtuous to feel an interior commitment to equal flourishing, to act with others on a shared investment in repairing our common home — even if one is not making a heroic final stand on the barricades. “We Go Low” is admirably ecumenical in the diversity of tactics it enlists in eco-political struggle, but it is still, ultimately, a theory of political virtue for left-wing environmental politics. This is to its credit.

Second, the demandingness of the socialist civic virtues does not emerge out of an ignorance on Luxemburg’s part of human frailty or the persistence of political failure.²⁰ Indeed, Luxemburg viewed failure as not only unavoidable but necessary. For her, as Geras (1994) writes, “the ordeal of mistakes and defeats” was “the sole experience out of which an indispensable education was to be derived” (96). Rather than aiming to banish the less-than-heroic from revolutionary politics, I suggest that the socialist civic virtues are lofty precisely because they are meant to shock, to jar us out of complacency. It’s important to return to the state of affairs to which Luxemburg is responding, one in which workers are habituated to think of themselves as “mere dead machines assigned their place in production by capital” (2004 [1918c], 351). We face a similar dispositional environment in contemporary ecological politics: the climate problem is one that leaves many feeling incapable of any efficacious commitment

²⁰ For a helpful discussion of Luxemburg’s experience of revolutionary commitment in the face of failure, see Mrovlje 2023.

(MacKinnon 2014; Garvey 2011; Gunderson 2020; Ojala et al. 2021). Recovering the socialist civic virtues in this despairing climate conjuncture could be promising because Luxemburg's aim was precisely to interrupt assumptions of inefficacy. After all, Luxemburg's move — responding to an attitude of disempowerment with an especially strong assertion of the capacities of her audience — is not altogether uncommon in human relations. A friend might respond to moments of discouragement about my progress writing a dissertation chapter by making exceedingly dramatic claims about my intellectual talents. Such claims can be empowering rather than immobilizing: they suggest that we have not always been as we are now, and we might still be otherwise. Luxemburg's invocation of the socialist civic virtues offers a rhetorical model for mobilization in moments of political despair; we might be wise to recover her model in our own times.

The task of emancipatory politics in the Anthropocene is the democratic determination of a better human-nature relationship; Luxemburg continues to help us see the obstacles the capitalist mode of production poses to such a task and emphasizes the intrinsic political-ethical value of democratic engagement with nature. Emancipatory politics in the Anthropocene struggles to overcome a despairing dispositional environment; Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues similarly aimed to work on dispositions of inefficacy and despair. Emancipatory politics in the Anthropocene reaches for a better world amid paradox and the risk of failure; paradox and the risk of failure was the practical ground from which Luxemburg's virtue theory emerged. Ultimately, the socialist civic virtues represent a promising resource for radical environmental politics.

At this juncture, however, Luxemburg's work still appears fundamentally humanist. In other words, it may be the case that Luxemburg illuminates the obstacles to stewarding our

common life alongside nature, suggesting virtues that might enable the achievement of a free form of life, without offering much guidance at all in how we might relate to the more-than-human world. However, it is the purpose of the following section to demonstrate that Luxemburg's writings do in fact contain rich reflections on how human beings ought to orient themselves *vis-à-vis* nature. It is, I will claim, possible to construct an environmental ethic inspired by Luxemburg. What's more, Luxemburg's example — overcoming despair through the cultivation of ecological virtues — offers an inspiring model of ethical formation for 21st-century environmentalism.

Narrating a Luxemburgian Ecological Ethic

Rosa Luxemburg had a great affection for more-than-human life: she was a doting guardian to her beloved cat, Mimi; a feverish student of botany; and an attentive observer of birds, mice, buffalo, and even wasps. Her richest reflections on the natural world are contained in her letters written during a long imprisonment near the end of her life. A lifelong letter writer, Luxemburg's epistolary habit accelerated during her prison sentence; these letters are treasured by admirers of Luxemburg for their warmth and lyrical quality. Several comrades of Luxemburg compiled a short collection of the prison letters in an effort to show "how this woman, rising above her own sufferings, embraced all the products of creation with understanding, love, and truly poetic power" (Laschitza 2013). But these letters also present something of an interpretive puzzle: is it possible to square the Luxemburg of the prison letters, overflowing with serenity and sensitivity, with the Luxemburg of bruising party politicking and rigorous philosophical inquiry? Is there anything of theoretical interest within these far-from-systematic nature writings?

While a growing number of authors have enlisted Luxemburg as a sophisticated environmental thinker (Starzmann 2021) (Aldridge 2023) (Lisiak 2024), this is not the mainstream approach to Luxemburg's nature writings. Luxemburg biographer J.P. Nettl suggests that her turn to nature writing in the prison years was merely a symptom of her restless confinement; cut off from community life, "things had to substitute for people — plants, flowers, animals, large and small" (2019, 665). Leigh Claire La Berge argues that although Luxemburg achieved a kind of camaraderie with animals in her personal life, her theoretical work "did not account for the ways in which other species...might desire to break free from [capital accumulation]." (2023, 285).

In other words, it is not merely Luxemburg's work that is a matter of interpretive dispute — it is the coherence of her life itself. Is it possible to read Luxemburg's life as lacking a kind of narrative unity? Luxemburg, one might maintain, was a person torn between two sets of largely incompatible goods. On the one hand, she vigorously pursued the goods of revolutionary struggle; on the other, she sought a kind of contemplative repose in nature. Political goods are set against the spiritual; human goods are set against the goods of her animal and plant companions. Red Rosa and the green Rosa of the prison letters are two faces of a nearly split personality.

I narrate Luxemburg's life differently, insisting that the prison letters are inseparable from an understanding of Luxemburg as a revolutionary. The despair that occasioned Luxemburg's environmental writings was an eminently political despair, grounded in the betrayal of official German socialism in supporting the war effort. The voluminous letters Luxemburg sent from prison capture a woman subjecting herself to a series of spiritual exercises of her own invention. Letter-writing itself was a component of the exercises: alone, she needed to hold her friends as close as she could muster. She needed to form new friendships as well, and

she found in bugs, birds, weeds, and other little creatures, wonderful candidates. The green Rosa of the prison letters is a woman trying desperately to stave off psychic collapse, *so that she can remain a revolutionary*. That she succeeded in this mammoth effort at self-cultivation is one of the great achievements of her short life.

These letters also contain genuine resources for contemporary environmental political theory and practice. I cohere the insights peppered throughout Luxemburg's unsystematic nature writings into two environmental 'ethics': Luxemburgian sympathy and the "Mensch Ethic." First, Luxemburg presents a rich matrix of habits and practices — encompassing taxonomical attention, acts of anthropomorphic imagination and speech mimicry, and, ultimately, an ethic of sympathy — to facilitate attentive care relationships across species divides. Second, Luxemburg, in the face of catastrophe, models an ethic — which I term her Mensch Ethic — oriented toward securing psychic survival for radical political practitioners in dark times. The Mensch Ethic, with its location of serenity in intimate attachments to parts of the natural world, is, I suggest, a particularly promising model of revolutionary resilience for contemporary environmental radicals. Luxemburg also proves herself a profound theorist of ecological vice, offering an account of the institutional and psychic roots of environmental domination.

In sum: My ultimate project in this section is to narrate Luxemburg's ethical formation amid despair in a way that might inspire us to subject ourselves to similar forms of self-cultivation. In the process of this narration, I highlight ways in which her particular ethic travels beyond her prison cell. Luxemburgian sympathy, the Mensch Ethic, and Luxemburg's account of ecological vice should be of broad interest to environmentalists. After all, they respond to rather fundamental dilemmas: how can we care for more-than-human creatures despite linguistic barriers? How can we keep our heads amid the tragedies of our climate conjuncture? How does

ecological domination relate to the domination of human beings? Luxemburg's insights also speak in powerful ways to central literatures in the environmental humanities. Thus, I develop Luxemburg's environmental sensibility through engagements with feminist and ecofeminist scholars of more-than-human ethics, as well as scholars exploring the virtues necessary for catastrophic times.

The Buffalo Letter: A Portrait of Ecological Vice

Perhaps Rosa Luxemburg's best-known letter was written to Sophie Liebknecht in December of 1917, from the prison in Breslau (2013, 419). It contains one of the most sensitive depictions of animal suffering ever written, as well as insight into a problem that *Eco-Republic* consciously defers: the ways in which the virtues humans bring to their interactions with other human beings relate to the virtues humans bring to their interactions with nature. More concretely, the Buffalo letter offers us a vivid picture of various forms of ecological *vice*. This is a letter whose author understands that cruelty and callousness toward human beings spills into the more-than-human world, and vice versa.

Sophie Liebknecht was the wife of Karl Liebknecht, a comrade of Luxemburg's who was also imprisoned for anti-war agitation. From her own prison cell, Luxemburg sent a steady stream of letters to Sophie urging her to maintain hope (Sophie's fear for her husband's safety was tragically well-founded, as Karl would, in a few short years, be murdered alongside Luxemburg). Luxemburg was relentlessly cheerful in her letters to her agonized friend. Indeed, Luxemburg's recounting of her encounter with a buffalo is bookended by characteristic injunctions to "see the beauty, and the joy of life" and "be calm and happy." And so, it comes as

something of a shock when Luxemburg suddenly declares, “Oh, Sonyichka, I’ve lived through something sharply, terribly painful here.”

Luxemburg has witnessed the brutal beating of a buffalo while walking the campus of Breslau (a profoundly grim facility which was later used as a Nazi prison camp). A truck has arrived from the western front carrying clothing — some stained with blood — for cleaning and mending. Unusually, however, this truck is being pulled by a team of buffalo, not horses.

Luxemburg, as is characteristic of her accounts of animals, begins with a description of almost taxonomical precision, explaining that buffalo are powerfully built, with “flattened heads, and horns strongly recurved, so that their skulls are shaped something like a sheep’s skull.” Also characteristic is her effort to encounter the animals on a deeper level than taxonomy, detailing the buffaloes’ “large, soft eyes,” which she will later liken to the eyes of a child. With that initial encounter, Luxemburg seeks to understand the structural-institutional factors that place these buffalo before her. They are “war trophies” from Romania, now enlisted to aid in the German war effort. Their capture and exploitation is a product of a global war and of processes, interests, and institutions that extend far beyond a prison in Breslau. Yet there is something more than instrumental going on in the German soldiers’ enlistment of these creatures; after all, we are told, it is extraordinarily “difficult to catch these animals, which had always run wild.” Given that these creatures have a certain wildness about them — they strongly resist efforts to interrupt their normal habits and activities — and an instinctive drive to preserve their form of life, it would seem that the driving of buffaloes is a rather inefficient use of military resources. Now that they’re captured, however, the buffalo are “unmercifully flogged,” eventually worked to death, “on the principle of *vae victis*.” Although the war can be understood as a result of material practices and interests, and the German war effort exploits the labor of buffalo in order to secure

its material interests, there's a kind of ethical perversity to the cruelty with which the buffalo are treated that overflows any objective appraisal of those interests. For Luxemburg, ecological vice comprises macro-practices that leave more-than-human creatures vulnerable to exploitation, as well as a libidinal environment wherein participants in those practices come to exhibit a kind of lavish brutality.

Indeed, the "soldier-driver" of the team demonstrates this overflowing brutality. Described as "a brute of a fellow," he begins beating the buffaloes so savagely that a prison official asks him whether he has any compassion for the animals: "No more than anyone has compassion for us men," he answered with an evil smile." The soldier-driver offers us a remarkable picture of human vice *vis-à-vis* more-than-human nature, a vice that is at once institutional and characterological. This man is a product of wartime human antagonism. He is charged with overseeing practices that establish an objectively antagonistic relationship between human beings and animals — the exploitation of buffalo labor to serve German logistical purposes — and, habituated into callousness, explodes with a cruelty that wildly exceeds his mandate.

Now, the soldier-driver's thrashings have broken the tough skin of one of the buffalo, and it is bleeding. Luxemburg looks into its eyes:

The one that was bleeding had an expression on its black face and in its soft black eyes like that of a weeping child – one that has been severely thrashed and does not know why, nor how to escape from the torment of ill-treatment. I stood in front of the team; the beast looked at me: the tears welled from my own eyes. The suffering of a dearly loved brother could hardly have nursed me more profoundly, than I was moved by my impotence in face of this mute agony. Far distant, lost forever, were the green, lush meadows of Romania. How different there the light of the sun, the breath of the wind; how different there the song of the birds and the melodious call of the herdsman....Poor wretch, I am as powerless, as dumb, as yourself; I am at one with you in my pain, my weakness, and my longing.

In this powerful passage, the encounter between Luxemburg and the buffalo has reached its completion. She deeply observed the animals on a taxonomical level, attempted a deeper form of attention through a glimpse into the buffalo's eyes, and now, faced with overwhelming animal suffering, has sympathetically grasped toward something like solidarity, such that she can describe herself as sharing this creature's pain. Luxemburg's solidarity is of a different sort than she might have with other human beings, as it is not clear that she can enlist the conscious support of this buffalo on behalf of some shared project; however, she can engage in imaginative acts of *identification* with the buffalo that reveal shared interests. But what exactly are these interests that Luxemburg and the injured buffalo share? Given Luxemburg's description of these animals' instinctive drive to run wild and their great resistance to being caught, and Luxemburg's own confinement in Breslau, I contend that Luxemburg is sharing with the buffalo a longing for *freedom*. To be sure, Luxemburg is capable of deeper forms of freedom than the buffalo (she can, for example, contribute to the free creation of ethical norms that might govern a community); however, human beings and non-human animals alike nonetheless share an interest in not being exploited and dominated in the course of their relevant species activities. To put it more simply, this buffalo has a freedom interest in continuing to partake in the life activities of buffalo. Intriguingly, Luxemburg's reference to the "melodious call of the herdsman" in her imagination of the buffalo's idyllic past suggests that it may be possible for human beings to enlist the labor of animals for human purposes in a way that nonetheless preserves a level of respect or even care.

By way of conclusion, Luxemburg directs her attention back to the human inhabitants of this miserable scene.

Meanwhile the women prisoners were jostling one another as they busily unloaded the dray and carried the heavy sacks into the building. The driver, hands in pockets, was

striding up and down the courtyard, smiling to himself as he whistled a popular air. I had a vision of all the splendor of war!

The women prisoners, whose own labor is being enlisted in the war effort, find themselves too busy with their own tasks to pick up on the acute suffering in front of their own eyes. The insensitivity to suffering that emerges from one's own suffering is another valence of the vices that emerge from "the splendor of war." The soldier-driver, spirits lifted by the infliction of cruelty, exhibits a far worse evil. Ecological vice now comprises not just the extraordinary brutality of the driver but also rather ordinary habits of insensitivity. Luxemburg's identification with the buffalo offers a model of attention that can interrupt insensitivity, a model of attention that will persist throughout the prison letters.

A Toolkit for More-Than-Human Attention

There's an amusing moment in another letter Luxemburg (2013, 429-32) pens to Sophie Liebknecht on August 2, 1917. Karl Liebknecht, Sophie's husband, has noticed Luxemburg's fervent interest in birds and thoughtfully asks, via Sophie, for a recommendation for a book about bird calls. Luxemburg does not take this well. "It surprises me a little that Karl wants a book specifically about bird calls," she snips. "For me the voice of the birds is inseparable from their habitat and their life as a whole, it is only the whole that interests me."

This response reflects Rosa Luxemburg's ambitious approach to understanding more-than-human nature. She aims to grasp creatures in their totality: their physical characteristics, habits, form of life, and even interests. Indeed, Lisiak (2024) persuasively suggests that Luxemburg's practices of plant and animal companionship — tending to, defending, and maintaining more-than-human objects in their specificity — resonate with feminist and

ecofeminist care theories.²¹ All care relationships are fraught with communication barriers and potential inequalities (Fisher and Tronto 2003). However, care for more-than-human entities face especially acute challenges in this respect (De La Bellacasa 2017). In contemporary environmental political theory, many thinkers have come to believe that more-than-human creatures may have interests that transcend their utility to human beings.²² A problem arises, however, with the assertion of more-than-human interests: since more-than-human entities participate minimally in human speech, how could human beings go about existing in an ethical care relationship with them? What Luxemburg gives us with her rich concept of attention (which culminates in an ethic of sympathy) is an interlocking set of practices that might attune human beings to more-than-human needs, animated by a spirit of care.

Ecofeminist scholars interested in more-than-human care relationships have consistently highlighted the centrality of attention to ethical life (Plumwood 2002; Donovan 1996; Warkentin 2010). Likewise, Luxemburg, in her own more-than-human ethic, endeavors for a particularly deep form of attention. But when encountering a creature for the first time, she begins by attending to the *surface*: its physical characteristics and taxonomical status. Recalling her introduction to botany prior to her imprisonment, Luxemburg (2013, 384-87) describes herself as “plunging” into the study of plant varieties, “with all my fire and passion, with my entire being,” and experiencing great suffering “when I sat in front of a new little plant and for a long time

²¹ Lisiak (2024) describes the care ethic of plant companionship as involving “noticing plant life and acknowledging it for what it is (Kimmerer, 2013), caring for and about it (Fisher and Tronto, 1990), protecting and defending it (Dirik, 2022; Tolhildan, 2018) and remaining humbly open to what we do not (yet) know about it (Berger, 2007; Massey, 2005)” (2).

²² See, for example, Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011 and Nussbaum 2024.

couldn't identify it...many times I almost fainted.”²³ But what value exactly does taxonomical self-education offer for Luxemburg's project of attention? The ability to quickly taxonomize a plant or animal reflects hours of past study of a variety of species. Deep knowledge of botany and zoology can instill a kind of wonder at the sheer diversity of more-than-human life. Attention to the surface of plants or animals offers a hint at a form of life: a creature's morphology carries traces of its habitat and life activities. Taxonomical attention offers a way in.

Luxemburg does not stop at the surface. Having encountered a creature as a representative of its species, she deploys two tactics to begin to attend to it in its individuality: engaging in acts of anthropomorphic imagination and attempting, however haltingly, to participate in a creature's speech. First, Luxemburg is constantly imagining animals and plants as possessing human characteristics. For her, a bumblebee's buzz is the crying of a child; a winter garden in her cell is made up of “little people.” In *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett (2010) defends practices of anthropomorphism; for her, imagining more-than-human nature in human terms can uncover “resonances and resemblances” that undermine the assumption that an ontological chasm divides us from the rest of our environment. Luxemburg seems to share this desire to uncover resemblances. In fact, she doesn't just think of natural phenomena in human terms: she reciprocally interprets human behavior along animal lines, telling Luise Kautsky to not “live like a little frog that's been stepped on” (2013, 451-52) and likening Mathilde Wurm to a “little lamb” (2013, 373-77).²⁴ Luxemburgian attention involves a constant toggling between human

²³ Rosa Luxemburg to Hans Diefenbach, March 30, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*. Edited by Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annelies Laschitzka. London and New York: Verso.

²⁴ Rosa Luxemburg to Luise Kautsky, November 24, 1917, and Rosa Luxemburg to Mathilde Wurm, February 16, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.

and more-than-human attributes: the society of creatures is imagined through human attributes, and human life is enlivened by a naturalistic perceptual lens.

Moreover, Luxemburgian attention works through the linguistic barriers between humans and animals. As pet owners (especially dog owners) know, creating a linguistic *modus vivendi* with an animal is an arduous but potentially rewarding process. Luxemburg has a deep fascination with animal linguistic practices and “languages”— especially bird calls. She does not attend to animal utterances for merely classificatory purposes; she attempts to enter into bird “language” by imitating bird calls.

The imitation of bird calls is about trying, even clumsily, to enter into the life activity of a different species.²⁵ Luxemburgian attention is never just about empirical observation; rather, it is a practice oriented toward achieving a kind of ethical accord with other beings. Thus far, we have seen Luxemburg engage in a complex ethical movement: she begins by attempting to grasp a creature in its capacity as a member of a species, and subsequently deploys tactics that aim toward understanding it in its individuality, tactics which include attempts at entering into its life activities. Luxemburgian attention contains still yet another move: the cultivation of *sympathy* for more-than-human creatures. Ultimately, Luxemburg suggests that rich attention to more-than-human objects is best deepened when we attempt a form of sympathetic understanding of them. In her conception, there exists a dynamic relationship between sympathy, attention, and ethical coexistence. The development of an abiding affection for a creature facilitates a more sensitive capacity for attention. “Only to the rude ear of one who is quite indifferent does the song of a bird seem always the same,” Luxemburg (2013, 411-14) writes to Sophie Liebknecht.

²⁵ I am indebted to Damali Britton for conversation on this point.

“If one has a love of animals, and a sympathetic understanding of them, one finds great diversity of expression, an entire ‘language.’”²⁶

But what precisely is the substance of Luxemburg’s particular form of sympathy? It combines affection for a creature (Luxemburg genuinely *likes* the large blue titmouse), a desire for closeness with a creature (Luxemburg takes great pleasure in the fact that these birds “immediately come running”), and an ethical orientation toward a creature (Luxemburg does not seek to dominate or exploit the things toward which she has sympathy). This form of sympathy is distinct from human love because it does not require mutuality: it is not clear that these birds possess a “sympathetic understanding” of Luxemburg. We do not know whether animals can feel love for human beings, but we do know that many animals — even some “wild” animals — can grow, over time, in their comfort with attentive and sympathetic human companions, such that a kind of coexistence free of domination and exploitation can obtain.

Finally, there is the question of the *political* status of Luxemburgian sympathy. Luxemburg’s sympathy is not a political ideal in the sense that the objects of her sympathy do not conceive of themselves as members of a political community with human companions. But Luxemburgian attention, which culminates in sympathy, has an important political valence: it broadens who human beings consider themselves to be “living with” and orients us toward more-than-human interests that ought to factor in democratic deliberation. Indeed, if sympathy helps us discern needs and interests that we intend to take seriously, it cannot help but spur us to political action; after all, the domination of more-than-human creatures is an essentially political phenomenon (Krause 2019). Val Plumwood (2002) argues that we ought to adopt an ethic of environmental solidarity: “standing with the (natural) other in a supportive relationship in the

²⁶ Rosa Luxemburg to Sophie Liebknecht, May 23, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.

political sense” (202). Taking the insights of Luxemburgian sympathy seriously (indeed, more seriously than Luxemburg herself) might ultimately orient us toward something like Plumwood’s notion of solidarity: a deep recognition of the structural barriers to environmental flourishing, and a willingness to act politically on behalf of more-than-human interests.²⁷

A Survival Guide for Radicals

From prison, Luxemburg faced catastrophe: the betrayal of a party that had been her life’s work and the senseless slaughter of millions of working people. Against temptations of resignation and despair, she developed an ethic — which I call Luxemburg’s “Mensch Ethic” — that enabled psychic survival amid calamity. This complex and demanding ethic brings together three habits of mind: an abiding openness to enter into political struggle when “history calls”; an effort to find serenity through sympathetic attention to proximate objects, especially in the natural world; and cooler passion for rigorous social analysis when faced with macro historical developments over which a single individual can have minimal influence. “To be a Mensch,” Luxemburg (1954 [1916]) writes in a letter to Mathilde Wurm, “means gladly to throw one’s whole life, when need be, onto the ‘great scale of destiny.’ And it means, as well, to find pleasure in each clear day and each beautiful cloud.”

In recent years, several scholars have inquired into the virtues that can help individuals navigate catastrophic cultural and ecological devastation (Lear 2006; Williston 2012; Cassegård

²⁷ Plumwood (2002) herself is critical of basing environmental ethics on an “unanalyzed and capricious emotion of empathy or sympathy,” the kind of instinctual revulsion one might experience upon witnessing animal suffering (205). I hope that I have shown that Luxemburgian sympathy is a far more deliberate and rich cognitive and ethical practice than any “capricious” version of the concept.

2018; Flores and Rousse 2016; Thaler 2024). This growing literature is especially pertinent to those who are already committed to a life of radical environmental activism, given their direct proximity to the tragedies of environmental politics. Luxemburg's Mensch Ethic — with its rich habits of ecological attachment and sensitivity to the dynamics of revolutionary passion — can serve as a remarkable model of psychic survival for environmental radicals. Though a supererogatory ideal, this ethic should inspire hope in a kind of revolutionary resilience: integrating virtues of struggle with virtues of serenity, intelligence, and care.

We have already encountered the elements of Luxemburgian attention *vis-à-vis* non-human nature. Luxemburg insists that the formation of sympathy through attention to proximate objects can preserve a kind of inner serenity in the face of suffering. This serenity, she suggests, appears as a “star-bespangled cloak” that can protect one’s passage through life “from everything petty, trivial, or harassing” (2004 [1917], 393). One can imagine how powerful the cultivation of sympathetic attachments with more-than-human objects could be for environmental radicals. For them, such sympathy is not merely an effort to seek shelter from the storm of world events — it’s modeling their own vision of a different mode of relating to the natural world.

But what exactly does Luxemburg find in more-than-human nature that offers serenity? The first thing is beauty. At Breslau, however, Luxemburg’s surroundings were, by any objective standard, not beautiful. She describes the prison yard as containing only “two narrow strips of ailing grass” (2013, 435-36).²⁸ Nonetheless, she throws herself into study of what plants and animals can be found, even in their “crippled condition,” praising the beauty of “a dozen hawkweed ... lifting up their sunny yellow heads.” Indeed, Luxemburg repeats the phrase “life is beautiful” in her prison letters so frequently that it becomes a mantra. Almost any sensory

²⁸ Rosa Luxemburg to Hans Diefenbach, August 13, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.

experience can reassure Luxemburg that life is beautiful; even “the gride of the damp gravel beneath the slow and heavy tread of the prison guard is...a lovely little song of life” (2004 [1917], 393). Her immersion in the natural world — with its little pockets of peace and regularity — inspires Luxemburg’s hope by reminding her of the dogged persistence of life itself (Starzmann 2021).

Secondly, Luxemburg is inspired by natural occurrences wherein creatures display an instinctive drive for freedom. In one letter to her young friend Hans Diefenbach, she recalls being trapped in her cell along with a buzzing wasp, flying repeatedly into a closed window, standing on a chair, grasping the wasp, and “[delivering] it to freedom, because otherwise it would torment itself against the glass.” Long after her cell falls back into silence, Luxemburg is lifted by the memory of the furious buzzing of the wasp, who will accept death before confinement. Confined herself, for Luxemburg the efforts of this tiny creature to escape confinement at all costs is hope-inspiring, reminding her that “life is beautiful” — after all, “the wasp has said so again, and it knows what it’s talking about” (2013, 387-89).²⁹

Finally, Luxemburg locates great humor in her relationships with certain animals. Laughter, for Luxemburg, has the function of reminding her of her relative powerlessness over the course of history. Though she is “ready at [her] post at all times,” she is presently taken off the revolutionary battlefield and reacts to her confinement with a smile. As she writes to Luise Kautsky on April 15, 1917: “Since right now I happen to be ‘on leave’ from World History... I just laugh to myself and rejoice that things are moving ahead without me” (2013, 392-95). Luxemburg attempts the difficult psychic task of disentangling her individual efforts from the

²⁹ Rosa Luxemburg to Hans Diefenbach, April 5, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.

fate of the world — while nonetheless resisting passivity. The Mensch Ethic involves an acceptance of relative powerlessness amid catastrophe, alongside a redirection of revolutionary passion toward intimate relationships with the natural world.

An acknowledgment of relative insignificance is central to another element of the Mensch Ethic: the practiced analytical coldness she brings to bear when faced with such macro-historical developments over which a single individual can have minimal influence. When objects of love and sympathy suffer, Luxemburg mourns. But she warns against attempting to absorb the suffering brought about by world-historical tragedies. “I can grieve or feel bad if Mimi is sick, or if you are not well,” she writes to Luise Kautsky. “But when the whole world is out of joint, then I merely seek to understand what is going on and why” (2013, 364-70).³⁰ To understand what is going on and why: this is a core element of the Mensch Ethic. This element emerges from a real doubt on Luxemburg’s part that human beings possess the psychic infrastructure to feel visceral sympathy with all the victims of modern catastrophes. Critically, the drive for analytical and historical understanding becomes another outlet for the expression of revolutionary passion. She hopes to transform the hot passions of agony and fury in the face of injustice into cooler passions for fearless inquiry and rigorous analysis. Luxemburg (2013, 408-11) herself models such passion, describing her time writing *The Accumulation of Capital*: “The time when I was writing ... I was living as though in euphoria...I saw and heard nothing else...but this one question.” This fervor for understanding cannot be disentangled from Luxemburg’s “tender affection for plant and animal life”; both, Jenny Odell writes, stem from “a kind of amor mundi, a never-ending love affair with complexity and the desire to do justice to it”

³⁰ Rosa Luxemburg to Luise Kautsky, January 26, 1917, in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*.

(2024). Of course, the virtues of intelligence and understanding also cannot be disentangled from the virtues of struggle; all theory, for Luxemburg, is ultimately oriented toward locating possibilities for emancipatory action.

A critical virtue in an era of ecological catastrophe, Flores and Rousse (2016) wisely suggest, is a kind of historical receptivity, the ability to “detect the ripening of newly emergent possibilities in a historical moment” and to activate such potentialities for a liberatory project (138). This virtue rhymes with one element of the Mensch Ethic: Luxemburg’s abiding readiness to throw oneself into the historical terrain when emancipatory openings arise. Amid the collapse of ethical, social, and ecological worlds, such a virtue combines an imaginative excellence in detecting historical emergences with the courage to act on such openings. What’s remarkable about the Mensch Ethic, however, is that Luxemburg integrates this virtue with habits oriented toward psychic survival for radicals and revolutionaries. Ajay Singh Chaudhary (2024) rejects discourses of individual “resilience” in the face of ecological catastrophe as promoting docility instead of revolutionary “externalization.” But the Mensch Ethic is the result of Luxemburg, experiencing the great disaster of her life, desperately working to survive *precisely so that she can continue to be a revolutionary*. With its ideal of serenity without passivity, its qualified acceptance of individual inefficacy, its multifarious habits of ecological attachment, and its redirection of revolutionary passion into intimacy and cool analysis, Luxemburg gives us a profound model of *revolutionary* resilience for our climate conjuncture.

Conclusion

Let us briefly come up for air. This chapter has emphasized two critical features of an eco-socialist civic virtue: its anti-capitalist orientation and its capacity to overcome despair.

Luxemburg's socialist civic virtues offer us a political framework between the old environmental virtue and contemporary environmentalist critics of capitalist institutions. I have championed a virtue theory that empowers immoderate excellences of struggle, emerges out of counter-hegemonic institutions, and is grounded in the democratic determination of the human-nature relationship. A socialist virtue ethic makes bold claims about human capacities in an effort to motivate the transformation of unfree social structures. It is attached not to a particular city or nation, but rather to diverse struggles demanding democratic authority over production. What's more, I described the life of Rosa Luxemburg as particularly appropriate for theorizing ethical formation in the face of despair. I have narrated Luxemburg's complex strategies of self-cultivation, explicating a vision of revolutionary resilience grounded in ecological sympathy. Luxemburg gives us one of those stories MacIntyre (2016) describes: a narrative that offers an education in what must be done to meet the demands of the virtues, thereby making ourselves into antagonists of the dominant social order.

I have suggested that each figure populating this dissertation models virtues attached to the flourishing of organic life. To conclude this chapter, I want to offer some speculative remarks about the relationship between the virtues Luxemburg offers us — both in the socialist civic virtues and in the prison letters — and flourishing. As we have seen, virtue can be a promising answer to theorizing motivational deficit concerns because of its intrinsic value. Traditionally, the life of virtue is a flourishing life, and we are motivated by the possibility of flourishing. At times, however, Luxemburg's virtues may appear somewhat instrumental (we might endorse the socialist civic virtues because they help enable a particular political project). But underneath Luxemburg's virtues is an orientation toward human and more-than-human flourishing. It may seem naïve, in this moment of political and ecological catastrophe, to locate hope in the

possibility of flourishing. But, as several scholars of more-than-human ethics suggest (Haraway 2008) (Cuomo 1998), radical environmental thinkers revile institutionalized domination and cruelty precisely because they're attached to flourishing. Flourishing, for many contemporary environmentalists, offers a standpoint for critique; it can also represent the object of a militant hope.

This, I suggest, is true of Luxemburg. Luxemburg was an individual with an inexhaustible desire for life. All of her passions — from her desire to grasp plant taxonomies to her desire to grasp processes of primitive accumulation; from her love of her friends to her love of revolutionary action — are underwritten by what Odell (2024) calls Luxemburg's *amor mundi*, her love of the world in all its human and non-human parts. Vivian Gornick (2011) puts it well: “[Luxemburg] wanted everything: marriage and children, books and music, walks on a summer evening and the revolution.” In her nature writings, Luxemburg demonstrates a concern for the flourishing of plant and animal life according to the logic of their species, absent domination or exploitation. The same holds true for human life: she abhors domination because it prevents human beings from participating in the full range of human life activities. The socialist civic virtues agitate toward the good of democratic life because human beings are creatures whose own life activities can be subject to deliberation, contestation, and reformulation. What's more, Luxemburg understands that the process of subjecting life activities to democratic contestation and reformulation is good for us and our flourishing.

Luxemburg's instincts around the question of flourishing, I suggest, resonate in several important ways with the theory offered by ecofeminist Chris Cuomo (1998). Briefly, both visions of flourishing are fundamentally materialist — that is, they are grounded in the biological realities and life practices of specific creatures. However, neither Cuomo nor Luxemburg are

committed to *teleological* visions of the ultimate, transhistorical goods of creatures. Both see flourishing as essentially contextual, and both locate their critique of practices of domination in the desire to see more widespread flourishing. However, Luxemburg the democrat sees the ways in which human flourishing is distinct from that of other forms of life. Additionally, Luxemburg the political economist can help us explain the processes and dynamics that cause more-than-human domination to take the form it does in a particular historical conjuncture.

For Luxemburg, sociality is a precondition not only of successful revolutionary action but any human life well lived. But this desire for flourishing through sociality extends beyond the merely human: Luxemburg seems to believe that her life would be less full absent sympathetic attachments to non-human creatures. There are real obstacles to such attachments: human practices of domination not only inhibit human flourishing but sweep up all manner of living things. But as Luxemburg hopefully suggested in the final months of her life, a politics of human solidarity might find itself contributing to the abundance and flourishing of all organic life (Luxemburg et al. 2008 [1918]).

Luxemburg, from prison, found solace and hope in examples of living beings — spanning revolutionaries in Petrograd to a bumblebee attempting to escape her jail cell — persisting in their struggle for liberation and flourishing. This habit, for Luxemburg, discloses an insight into the persistence of life, one which underwrote Luxemburg's own extraordinary persistence. In our moment of catastrophe and political disempowerment, we might update Luxemburg's practice for our own time. Look around, Luxemburg seems to tell us, at all these irrepressible creatures: look at these men and women around the world risking their necks to preserve their beloved landscapes, and look, too, at these little sprouts poking above the snow. Surrounded by life, in its stubborn insistence on its own endurance, what appeal has despair?

CHAPTER TWO: ZORA'S VISION: ETHICAL INNOVATION AND BURDENED VIRTUE IN W.E.B. DUBOIS

Introduction

If the previous chapter laid the groundwork for a theory of structure and character for an eco-socialist civic virtue, this chapter explores how an eco-socialist civic virtue might be *empowering*. The problem that guides me here is disempowerment, the subjective experience of objective structures of domination and oppression. As we explored with Luxemburg, the vast majority of individuals lack meaningful authority over the human-nature relationship. But disempowerment is not evenly distributed, even among non-capitalists. This chapter is particularly concerned with environmental racism, a term I use to describe the racial stratification of environmental benefits and burdens (Bhardwaj 2023). Environmental racism frequently inhibits confident political action by producing disempowered affects (resignation, fear, servility). As in Chapter One, this chapter narrates the overcoming of a dispositional obstacle to action. We have already explored the specifically socialist character of an eco-socialist civic virtue; this chapter draws out the *hybrid* and *burdened* character of this ethic. However, my exploration here differs from the prior chapter in one important way: the figure whose ethical formation concerns me is a literary creation, the protagonist of a novel. Therefore, this chapter is an exercise in re-narration, the reconstruction of a pre-existing literary narrative aimed at extracting ethical resources for 21st-century environmental politics.

Let's meet our novel: W.E.B. DuBois's 1911 text, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, takes place in a world that rhymes with our own. A drama of love and political struggle in the postbellum South, *Quest* is set in fictionalized Tooms County in rural Alabama, where exploitative economic practices are exhausting both the land and Toomsville's Black residents.

The benefits of cotton production flow overwhelmingly to white northern capitalists and large landowners, and Black residents are forced to absorb the economic and environmental costs. The Black population in Toomsville is prevented — through interlocking forces of market subordination and racial exclusion — from determining its own relationship with the environment. *Quest*'s protagonist, Zora, works to transform the community's relationship with the land, eventually establishing a Black farm cooperative in the swamp on the outskirts of town. In the course of her work, she also transforms herself, cultivating capacities and excellences of character that enable the overcoming of disempowerment and political struggle against northern monopolists and the Southern planter class.

Quest, in other words, takes place amid a matrix of ecological and social practices that can aptly be described as environmental racism.³¹ In this unusual novel, DuBois asks: What is the relationship between environmental practices and racial oppression? How do environmental practices produce disempowerment — and how does racism affect the ways in which Black Americans relate to the earth? Such questions, of course, remain pressing in the 21st century. Indeed, in 2023, Lowndes County, Alabama — the inspiration for *Quest*'s fictionalized Tooms — settled a case with the Department of Justice alleging that the county had systematically exposed Black residents to environmental pollutants.³² Most of us occupy landscapes where the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens are racially stratified; in such a world, *Quest*'s

³¹ Broadly, for me, environmental racism describes practices, processes, and institutions that stratify environmental benefits and burdens along racial lines. See, for example, Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. Vol. 34. NYU Press, 2001.

³² For more on the sociological inspiration for *Quest*, see James 2012. For more on contemporary environmental racism in Lowndes County, see Rushing 2023.

political ecological diagnosis remains distressingly relevant. The quest that gives the novel its title is the quest of a poor, largely uneducated young woman to overcome structurally grounded disempowerment.

A growing body of scholarship has persuasively elevated DuBois as an early theorist of environmental racism. My intervention in this chapter is to argue that *Quest* dramatizes the cultivation of a kind of political virtue in the face of disempowerment. After all, *Quest* is not merely a diagnostic text outlining the multifarious obstacles to environmental justice. It also narrates the process by which Black residents — agitated by Zora — fight back and begin to develop more virtuous socio-environmental practices. *Quest* is a perceptive social novel: it offers a panoramic view of a number of pervasive ethics — that is, historically and socially established modes of moving through the world, valorizing specific virtues — in the postbellum United States. *Quest* is also a novel of formation. Throughout their respective journeys — moving through Alabama, New York, and Washington, D.C. — Zora and her love interest, Bles, encounter both environmental racism and the varieties of social ethics. In the face of the problems afflicting their community, Zora, and to a lesser extent Bles, develop their own novel ethic, with their own accompanying virtues. The ethic that emerges in *Quest* is hybrid: it is developed on the go, and makes use of materials from various extant ethics but transforms those ethics in the face of the problem of environmental racism. My reading of *Quest* clarifies the hybrid character of an eco-socialist civic virtue. An eco-socialist civic virtue emerges from encounters with plural ethical traditions, creatively but respectfully refashioning traditions of living in the face of contemporary problems.

Does it even make sense to speak of virtue under conditions of oppression and disempowerment? The idea of individuals in a state of quasi-serfdom achieving virtue would be

entirely foreign to Aristotle, whose virtuous gentleman is free from a life of toil (Aristotle 2013). Contemporary neo-republicans abhor domination because it inculcates servility on the part of the dominated and imperiousness on the part of the dominator; that is, domination inhibits virtue (Pettit 1997). Lisa Tessman’s fascinating study *Burdened Virtue: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (2005) demonstrates how oppression prevents everyone — including those oppressed individuals who struggle for greater emancipation — from flourishing completely. DuBois, I suggest, takes it as a given that widespread practices of subordination and exclusion inhibit virtue and flourishing. That said, it is difficult to imagine successful struggles for political, social and environmental emancipation absent individuals possessing character traits that properly equip them for agitation. Such character traits are not virtuous in an uncomplicated sense — they are, to use Tessman’s language, burdened — but they can nonetheless be praiseworthy if we believe that emancipation is a precondition for more widespread flourishing.

An account of virtue that is both burdened and hybrid is particularly valuable in theorizing the political ethics of eco-socialist struggle. After all, such struggles take place in conditions far worse than those we would have freely chosen—ours is a world where moral remainder haunts even the most praiseworthy political actor. What’s more, successful action against a global problem like climate change will necessarily be transnational. The virtues animating a formation like “Blockadia” are the product of hybrid cultural encounters, not some monistic community of ethical practice.

This chapter proceeds from the provocative claim that DuBois is one of history’s most powerful theorists of environmental action. But why focus on *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*? After all, DuBois’s interest in environmental themes spanned his career. I emphasize *Quest* for three reasons related to the broader themes of my project developing an account of eco-socialist

civic virtue. First, *Quest* is by far the most extensive meditation on environmental racism and political disempowerment in DuBois's written work. Second, unlike some of DuBois's more traditional sociological writings, *Quest* is deeply interested in the ethical formation of individuals involved in political struggle (in Zora's case, the formation of leaders of a subordinated group). Third, *Quest* presents an explicitly socialist vision: the Black residents of Tooms County take back power from the white elite by managing land in common. Thus, *Quest* represents not simply a meditation on the development of group leaders but the development of group leaders aiming toward socialist transformation in the face of disempowerment.

But the primary reason I devote considerable space to a careful reading of *Quest* is that out of my reading emerges three particular, interlocking virtues — devotion, self-possession, and vision — that respond wisely to timeless demands of radical leadership. Zora's virtue of devotion responds to the problem of enduring political commitment: how can one maintain a fierce resolve to advance a political vision? Her virtue of self-possession speaks to the regulation of emotion for radical leaders: is it possible to metabolize the affects that are commonly occasioned by proximity to oppression in a way that can enable self-giving action? And the virtue of vision responds to the demands of political-ecological attention: how can one learn to survey one's landscape and discern latent possibilities in the midst of oppression? This trifecta of virtues represents a loose ethical system (the requirement of self-possession is occasioned by an object of devotion; devotion only flourishes when the devoted leader is self-possessed; vision is ultimately motivated and completed through a kind of devoted love, etc). And, for Zora, each virtue has an ecological valence: devotion motivates a practice of ecological return; self-possession comes to inform how one might relate to the possession of the material world; and vision underlies a creative responsiveness to the natural world. Despite being a literary creation,

Zora herself is an exemplar, much like Luxemburg. It is not an overstatement to call her a model of self-cultivation for contemporary readers.

This chapter will begin with a brief description of DuBois's status as a theorist of environmental racism. Then, I make the case for DuBois as a theorist of burdened and hybrid virtue under conditions of oppression. From there, the bulk of the chapter will consist of a narration of Zora's ethical formation in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Throughout my analysis, I will highlight the ecological upshot of each virtue, its upshot with respect to group leadership, and various deformed or anti-emancipatory versions of the virtues.

Environmental Racism and Political Disempowerment According to W.E.B. DuBois

The first chapter of W.E.B. DuBois's astonishing 1920 text *Darkwater* situates the reader — and DuBois as epic narrator — in the natural world: “I was born by a golden river and in the shadow of two great hills, five years after the Emancipation Proclamation” (1999, 3). During DuBois' life, industry wrought tremendous changes on the natural landscape — and indeed, only a couple pages later, DuBois casts a shadow on his idyllic childhood environs: “That river of my birth was golden because of the woolen and paper waste that soiled it” (6). These two remarks offer a window into DuBois's environmental sensibility, which combines a romantic — or, Romantic — appreciation for natural beauty with a deep attention to the social arrangements that remake the land and the lives of human beings living alongside it.

In her excellent survey of African American environmental thought, Kimberly Smith (2007) writes that “the environmental history of black Americans is a history of struggle against...forces of alienation and dispossession. As such, it lays bare the social conditions of environmental virtue.” (3). In other words, the Black experience in America highlights how

exploitative practices prevent oppressor and oppressed alike from establishing a healthy relationship to the land. In the aftermath of slavery Black Americans, DuBois will insist, have an intimate but fraught connection with the land; one of DuBois's aims as an environmental writer is to convey "the strange rendings of nature [Black Americans] have seen" (2018, 85). In "Of the Black Belt," his study in *The Souls of Black Folk* of postbellum agriculture, DuBois describes the racially stratified phenomenological experience of the land during the peak of the plantation system. White planters partake in "gay entertainment" in "parks and groves...rich with flower and vine," while for Black slaves, "this land was a little Hell" (97). This is a key insight in DuBois's environmental thought: under conditions of racial subordination on the land, a single physical place can be experienced as multiple distinct "environments" for those occupying distinct social positions.³³

The verdance and abundance of the plantation South would not last, DuBois tells us in *Souls*. Ultimately, there was "a certain feverish unrest and recklessness" to the slave system: after all, he writes, "Was not all this show and tinsel built upon a groan?" (2018, 97). One of the most remarkable aspects of "Of the Black Belt" is its attention to affect and feeling across distinct environments, informed by the social arrangements determining the human-nature relationship in a particular place. For DuBois, practices of extraction, abuse, and domination make a landscape feel "sordid" or "forlorn and forsaken," even when the landscape is superficially attractive. "A resistless feeling of depression falls slowly upon us," he writes from southern Georgia, "despite the gaudy sunshine and the green cottonfields" (92). It is possible to speak of a DuBoisian sublime in these nature writings, occasioned by the terror experienced in a landscape that housed incalculable human misery. Of course, environmental practices that

³³ For an excellent discussion along these lines, see Bhardwaj 2023.

subordinate Black individuals do not simply leave an affective trace. The feverishness of the plantation system was constituted by reckless material practices of production. Black sharecroppers inhabit an environment that has been drained of vitality by unsustainable forms of agriculture, and who have themselves been drained of vitality, of almost all hope. These individuals seem to carry the damage of political, social, and ecological degradation and domination in their person, in their bodies and their subjectivities. In other words, they experience a deep form of disempowerment. DuBois's environmental writings are deeply attuned to the ways that the domination of human beings comes to be reflected in ecological landscapes, and the ways such landscapes reciprocally shape the sensibilities and life-chances of human inhabitants.

Of course, DuBois's environmental writings extend beyond *Souls*, and he concerns himself with environments beyond the farm and the nature preserve. As Bhardwaj (2023) writes in a recent primer, DuBois understands the concept of "environment" broadly, as "the surrounds we experience and within which we develop meaning in everyday life" (106). In this way, his work resonates with many contemporary theorists of environmental racism who understand our environment to be simply "where we live, where we work, where we play, and where we learn" (Cole and Foster 2001, 16). In an additional resonance with contemporary activism against environmental racism, DuBois was an early diagnostician of Black vulnerability to ecological disaster. Writing for *The Crisis*, DuBois initiated a lengthy investigation into the institutional response to a disastrous 1927 flood in Mississippi, savaging the comprehensive disregard relief agencies demonstrated toward hundreds of thousands of Black refugees. "While official reports would frame the flood as a *natural* disaster," Jonathan Claborn (2012) writes, "DuBois and the NAACP would offer a counter-narrative of the event as a *civil-rights* catastrophe" (2). DuBois

also highlights the ways in which environmental features can themselves become elements that further racialization. In a process that Bhardwaj (2023) describes as “environmental racialization,” a desire to retain exclusive access to environmental benefits often stimulated the uptake of racial ideology among white workers, while the association of Blacks with degraded environments frequently led to the circulation of stereotypes holding that Black individuals were incapable of competent stewardship (109).

DuBois, as we have now seen, is an astute diagnostician and critic of environmental racism, as well as the experience of disempowerment that flows from this deplorable form of oppression. But does the natural world play a meaningful role in his positive vision for American democracy? One of DuBois’s most powerful encapsulations of his vision comes in the “Credo” that opens *Darkwater*. Here, he writes:

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.

I believe in the Training of Children, black even as white; the leading out of little souls into the green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth; lest we forget, and the sons of the fathers, like Esau, for mere meat barter their birthright in a mighty nation (1999, 19).

This emancipatory vision begins *Darkwater*, the DuBoisian text that offers the most profound defense of political and economic democracy. But it would be a mistake to overlook the Credo’s *ecological* elements. He locates human freedom, through self-realization and enlargement, in a flourishing natural environment of sunshine, green pastures, and still waters. He joins traditional political freedoms with the freedom to determine one’s work, the freedom to exist in a clean environment, and the psychic freedom to dream. The liberation promised in the

“Credo” is at once civic and ecological. Critically, the image of integrated human beings (riding on railroads “uncursed by color”) is paired with an image of human beings integrated into the natural landscape (enjoying their “right to breathe” and “enjoy the sunshine”). DuBois, it seems to me, believes that intercourse with the natural world is an important component of emancipated, democratic human sociality. In an emancipated and democratic society, our natural surrounds contribute to the “large vision of beauty and goodness and truth” that we have chosen for ourselves. We can interpret the meaning of our landscapes in our form of life, and take our natural surrounds as material in constructing it. As Smith (2007) wisely notes, practices of environmental injustice “[interfere] with the community’s ability to give its own meaning to the landscape.” When we are alienated from our capacity to creatively engage nature, we are cut off from the spiritual benefits of ecological citizenship: we lack the opportunity to develop abiding relationships with landscapes and their more-than-human parts, or to experience the flourishing of one’s human community alongside one’s environmental surrounds. The function that ecological citizenship serves in DuBois’s specifically *socialist* vision will emerge later in our discussion of the Black farm commune in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.

DuBois’s Virtues

DuBois’s political vision requires that individuals come to possess certain excellences of character, excellences which require time, attention, and diligence for their cultivation. For DuBois, racial uplift and multiracial democracy are endeavors that do not come intuitively: the praiseworthy habits and practices that could sustain such praiseworthy efforts must be learned. As we will see, DuBois offers an original and compelling account of how virtues can be reinterpreted and transformed in the face of novel historical-environmental circumstances.

There is, of course, an obvious sense in which DuBois is a thinker interested in virtue. DuBois's Victorian instincts, his personal commitment to distinction and refinement, is well-trod interpretive territory.³⁴ But it is not just traditional morality that interests DuBois in foundational texts like *The Souls of Black Folk*: it is the entire system of ethical-spiritual life that obtains among a people. In the opening passages of *Souls*, DuBois announces his intent to "sketch, in vague, uncertain outline, the spiritual world in which ten thousand Americans live and strive." What elements comprise this spiritual world? DuBois appears to give a description much later in the text, in his discussion of the South:

There still remains a part essential to a proper description of the South which it is difficult to describe or fix in terms easily understood by strangers. It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, the thousand and one little actions which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole (2018, 137).

This is precisely what DuBois is trying to give self-conscious expression in *Souls*: the patterns of thought, memory, affect, activity, and aspiration that ground the life of Black Americans. Such patterns include specific virtues that might be prized among segments of the Black population. But the subject of DuBois's study is broader, encompassing vices, unconscious elements of feeling, the traces of historical trauma, and aesthetic sensibilities. All of these elements, along with the *natural* environment a people encounters in daily life, give a landscape its "atmosphere." DuBois is not simply interested in *describing* the ethical-spiritual life of Black people in America; he is interested in removing the obstacles to Black development and flourishing. DuBois's concept of the "soul" has a developmental character: the human soul seeks knowledge and strives toward greater flourishing. The soul, here, is attached to

³⁴ See, for example, "The Distinction of W.E.B. DuBois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Politics," in Posnock 2018.

praiseworthy goods; it does not concern itself with riches or “Rhine-gold” but rather the elements — culture, justice, beauty, truth — that make a human life worth living.³⁵ The individual, moved by the soul toward self-education and cultivation, would seem, in DuBois’s ideal, to develop excellences appropriate to a good human life.

To recapitulate: DuBois’s project in a text like *Souls* is to attempt to give self-conscious expression to the ethical-spiritual life of a people. The ethical-spiritual life of a people contains specific virtues, but also a great deal else. Part of the practice of expressing the life of a people is to think about that people’s ethical expansion; ethical expansion is the drive of the “sovereign human soul.” The process of ethical expansion involves education and cultivation, oriented toward praiseworthy human ends. Thus, one can plausibly conclude that the process of ethical expansion would involve the cultivation of specific virtues, or excellences of character. And across DuBois’s written work, we can see him endorse and elevate specific excellences as necessary for racial uplift, democratic practice, and other virtuous human endeavors.

But what are these specific virtues? The way I read DuBois on these questions is indebted to the work of Jonathon S. Kahn, especially in his 2011 text, *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. DuBois*. Kahn, a scholar of religion, is primarily interested in DuBois’s engagement with Black American religious traditions, but I suggest the process by which DuBois transforms and elevates specifically religious virtues also applies to his engagement with more secular ethics. The basic argument is this: DuBois, despite being resolutely agnostic on metaphysical questions, conceives of Black religion as a language by which individuals wrestle with the trials, paradoxes, pains, and joys they experience in their environment. Thus, the religious virtues that come to be elevated in a tradition are elevated for a reason: they have been

³⁵ My reading here is indebted to Gooding-Williams 2009.

found, through the trials of historical experience, to enable individuals to navigate life in a desirable way. However, historical circumstances change: new problems arise and novel dilemmas call for novel capacities and excellences. Religious traditions risk becoming stale if they cannot update their understanding of the virtues in the face of changing problems. DuBois endorses a kind of ethical innovation, but unlike some pragmatists who attempt to theorize a new religious-ethical language with little regard for the traditions of the past, he believes, as Kahn writes, “innovation can fruitfully come only from tough dialectical work with African American religious history and ritual” (2011, 64). Indeed, piety itself — for the traditions, ethics, and accomplishments of one’s people — is a cornerstone virtue for DuBois.³⁶ What’s more, as we will see, ethical resources do not simply emerge from one’s own community; ethical innovation in *Quest* is hybrid, emerging through encounters with plural communities of practice.

To speak of virtues being cultivated in the midst of oppression and domination is fraught. As Tessman (2005) has ably described, the virtues that tend to enable resistance to oppression — sensitivity to suffering, a kind of righteous anger at injustice, group loyalty — are not consistently linked to the flourishing of their bearer. These virtues are “burdened,” Tessman argues, because their actualization “takes place under conditions...where doing what is best falls far short of what one would have chosen given better conditions” (5). Importantly, the burdened virtues are, in fact, still virtues, despite their ambiguous connection to flourishing. We might still praise the burdened virtues for a number of different reasons: (1) because they *would* be connected to flourishing in a better world, (2) because they permit moments of flourishing in a life that is otherwise rather painful, or (3) because they contribute to a world where widespread flourishing is more likely.

³⁶ See “‘Love for These People’: Racial Piety as Religious Devotion,” in Kahn 2011.

Take, for example, the dilemma facing the protagonist of DuBois's short story in *Souls* "Of the Coming of John"; reformulated versions of several of the critical scenes in this story will appear in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. This story, like *Quest*, is about the development of a young prospective race leader, John, who is sent north by his southern Black community to receive an education. After returning, John speaks to a religious congregation in the language of secular progressivism, and is rejected by the community. John has failed to recognize the importance of the Black church in helping individuals navigate myriad historical trials. He does not attempt an act of pious translation of a valued ethic for novel circumstances: he attempts to impose an alien ethic, putting "rough, rude hands on something this little world held sacred" (DuBois 2018, 183). However, the story ends with a profound act of virtue on John's part: he prevents his sister from being raped, subjecting himself to the violence of a white lynch mob. There is little doubt that DuBois believes John has displayed virtues of courage and sacrifice in these final scenes; however, the story ends in tragedy, prior to John's imminent lynching. DuBois, Kahn suggests, both insists that the project of ethical transformation is essential, while retaining a "real uncertainty of how to achieve this and whether it can be done without enormous loss" (2011, 63).

DuBois, as discussed, thinks of virtues as tools that communities develop to help them navigate the problems that arise in their environments. He understands a concept like "environment" broadly as encompassing non-human "nature," the built environment, and human social relations and institutions. Our environments are constantly changing, requiring practices of ethical innovation of the virtues in response to new "environmental" problems. Accelerating climate change is forcing human beings to adapt themselves to a rapidly and unpredictably changing environment. Many of us feel that the old answers will be insufficient to the ecology of

the future. DuBois's way of theorizing the virtues seems promising here: it opens the door to innovation in the way we navigate our environments, through engagements with plural ethical traditions, while not shying away from the possibility of loss or failure.

Ethical Innovation and Socialist Transformation in The Quest of the Silver Fleece

The Quest of the Silver Fleece contains two interwoven storylines — one populated by white characters, the other by Black characters — both entirely oriented around a human practice *vis-à-vis* the land: cotton production. In the first, the northern Taylors attempt an alliance with the old Southern planter Cresswells in an effort to jointly monopolize cotton cultivation and textile production. In the novel's primary storyline, Bles and, more profoundly, Zora transform themselves into young leaders, agitating Black residents of Tooms County to develop their own cotton commune against the nexus of northern finance and the Southern planter class. In DuBois's telling, everyday life in Tooms County — with its bizarre admixture of capitalist and feudal elements — is comprehensively mediated by the relationship between human beings and this one plant. Here, DuBois (1911) writes of the cotton fields, “pulsed the very life and being of the land” (39). DuBois writes,

After the miracle of the bursting bolls, when the land was brightest with the piled mist of the Fleece, and when the cry of the naked was loudest in the mouths of men, a sudden cloud of workers swarmed between the Cotton and the Naked, spinning and weaving and sewing and carrying the Fleece and mining and minting and bringing the Silver till the Song of Service filled the world and the poetry of Toil was in the souls of the laborers. **Yet ever and always there were tense silent white-faced men moving in that swarm who felt no poetry and heard no song**” (1911, 54). [emphasis mine]

In this passage, DuBois pulls a bait and switch: Tooms initially appears as a flourishing cotton environment, where individuals motivated by the “Song of Service” labor to meet the demands of the “naked.” But then this happy story of supply and demand is interrupted by the appearance

of “tense silent white-faced men,” northern capitalists and Southern planters alike. These tense white-faced men are the ultimate beneficiaries of environmental benefits in *Quest*; cotton production, we learn, is premised on, and reinforces, brutal practices of Black subordination and disempowerment.

Quest is, on one level, a sociological study in the form of a novel: it represents an astute diagnosis of how a society still largely organized along feudal lines produces a commodity for global capitalist markets, and how such production practices generate diverse forms of economic, social, and ecological misery along racially stratified lines. At the same time, DuBois is interested in the phenomenology of disempowerment under conditions of environmental racism: how does it feel to live in a society where a white ruling class leeches value out of land and labor? The combination of these elements in the novel generates what Claire Marie Class (2022) aptly describes as a “sociology of feeling.” There is room for the utopian in the world of this novel: Zora and Bles end up married, and an empowered cotton commune withstands a white mob.³⁷ *Quest* is one of the earliest DuBoisian texts that presents an explicitly socialist vision.³⁸ Zora discovers that attempts at Black empowerment through individual property holdings will ultimately be fragile in the face of planter fraud, legal disregard, and financial consolidation. The only hope for political empowerment — an undoubtedly uncertain hope — is holding the land in common, cultivating a better relationship with the earth within the context of a “free community.”

³⁷ For more on the utopian aspects of *Quest*, see Byerman 1992.

³⁸ For more on how *Quest* relates to DuBois’s developing socialism see Van Wienen 2007.

This text is both a novel of formation and a novel of manners. It is a study of the customs, ethics, and virtues that arise to permit various characters to navigate their social and natural environments. Four of the major characters represent distinct archetypes of white New England ethical life: the schoolteacher Miss Smith stands for Protestant conscience and virtue, devoting herself to the education of Black youth with an admirable constancy; Miss Vanderpool is the languorous old-world aristocrat, whose worldliness is tinged with boredom; John Taylor is the rising captain of finance, combining propriety with rapacious capitalist speculation; John's misguided sister Mary represents a younger generation of elite New England women, who aspire to "reform" and the aesthetics of society life while lacking the religious rectitude of a Miss Smith. The Cresswells are masters of the feudal old South, with a commitment to "manners" and total Black subordination. Among the Black characters in the text, we encounter representatives of the Southern Black church, as well as the rising Black middle class.

What is notable about Zora is that, at the novel's outset, she lacks a solid ethic of her own. There are intriguing dispositional fragments, but these are unformed. The formation of these fragments into empowering hybrid virtues — as she encounters extant ethics both admirable and deplorable, as well as the problem of environmental racism — represents the primary drama of the text. So what are these empowering virtues? I will discuss three: self-possession, devotion, and vision. Devotion enables Zora to make an abiding political commitment, self-possession regulates her affects amid the tumult of struggle, and vision permits her to survey the social-ecological landscape for points of transformative leverage. Each of these excellences, as we will see, properly orient both the individual's relationship to their fellows and to the natural world. *Quest* also presents us with distorted versions of each of these virtues (self-possession as masculinist paternalism, devotion as submission to white authority, and the

visionary practices associated with the aesthetics of the planter class). These virtues exist in a kind of system: they interact with one another and, in some cases, complete each other. Ultimately, they enable Zora's transformation into an empowered radical leader, against the disempowering forces of environmental racism.

Devotion

In this section, I will discuss Zora's cultivation of a virtue of devotion, oriented toward Black empowerment through socialist transformation. I choose the word devotion because of its multiple valences; after all, devotion describes both a kind of intense piety, often religious piety, and the result of dedication and endurance on behalf of a cause. As we will see with each of *Quest's* virtues, Zora begins the novel already possessing a fragment of devotion: a kind of incipient racial piety. However, she spends a great deal of the novel in search of a cause — the “Way,” as she describes it — as well as capacities of constancy and diligence brought to bear on behalf of that cause. First, I describe the seed of Zora's mature devotion — her inchoate piety. Then, I discuss two approaches to devotion embedded within existing ethics: one of these, the devotion praised by the white minister Boldish, is oppressive and deplorable; the other, the constancy of Miss Smith, is praiseworthy but ultimately insufficient to the disempowerment facing Toomsville's Black residents. From there, I discuss the slow development of Zora's devotion, emphasizing the ways in which its expression is particularly appropriate to the challenge of group leadership in a socialist politics. Finally, I will discuss how the logic of Zora's devotion can speak to contemporary activism against environmental racism.

The process of ethical formation in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* follows a logic of separation and return. The orienting plot device of the Zora-Bles storyline is their courtship,

Bles's abandonment, and their eventual reconciliation. Similarly, with each of the virtues I discuss, we begin with an initial seed of the relevant excellence, proceed through some kind of separation from that seed, and conclude with its reincorporation into a mature virtue. Zora, from the beginning of *Quest*, loves Black people. Her piety, here, takes the form of an honoring of Black spiritual gifts. In an early conversation with Bles, Zora dismisses Bles's diagnosis of white social domination. "They just got things — heavy, dead things," she insists. "We black folks is got the *spirit*" (1911, 46). Zora is not wrong about the heavy, dead things central to the spiritual life of white people, but she is, in an important way, mistaken in underestimating white rule itself. After all, in the preceding line, she appears to deny the reality of white supremacy in postbellum Alabama: "They [white people] don't really rule; they just thinks they rule" (Ibid.). DuBois, at his best in texts like *Souls*, combines a sociologically precise diagnosis of Black oppression with a pious affection and care for the trials and strivings of ordinary Black people. Bles begins *Quest* with a relatively sophisticated sociological understanding of white supremacy but a paternalistic and lofty orientation toward the Black "masses." Zora is precisely the opposite: her appreciation for the spiritual gifts offered by Black folk is so deep that she minimizes objective, material practices of racial disregard. Her early piety is without the capacity for practical commitment exhibited in her mature devotion because she has not embraced Black uplift as her "Way."

Far before Zora develops her political and ethical vision, *Quest* offers us deficient versions of the virtue of devotion. The most appalling is described in a speech by the white northern minister Dr. Rev. Boldish before a gathering of Black children attending Miss Smith's school. "Remember that the slavery of your people was not necessarily a crime," Boldish preaches. "It was a school of work and love. It gave you noble friends ... Love and serve them

... Let your ambition be to serve rather than rule, to be humble followers of the lowly Jesus” (175). With Boldish, we have a vivid example of the virtue of devotion — and its purported ethical benefits — put in the service of domination. Black people, in Boldish’s telling, are not permitted to choose the object of their devotion; they are required to mimic “the lowly Jesus” by submitting to a white supremacist social order. With the inclusion of Boldish, DuBois draws a clear contrast between devotion as submission to hierarchy and Zora’s developing devotion as commitment to racial uplift.

A more promising version of the virtue of devotion is embodied in *Quest* by Miss Smith, the New Englander running a school for Black children that both Zora and Bles attend. Her orienting commitment is a northern egalitarian Protestantism — emphasizing the natural equality of souls irrespective of race — that DuBois clearly admires. Conscience, work, and enduring commitment define her ethical mode. She displays such constancy at the bedside of Zora during her lowest moment: when Bles abandons her — as well as their shared endeavor, the cultivation of cotton in the swamp — for lacking “purity.” Zora is in a profound state of despair — experiencing “an infinite loneliness and silence” — and Smith urges her to some enduring commitment, insisting that “work is the only cure for such pain” (182). Zora has a realization — that Miss Smith’s form of devotion, while admirable, is not quite suited to her character. “‘You were born in ice,’ she retorted, adding a bit more tenderly, ‘in clear strong ice; but I was born in fire. I live—I love; that’s all.’” For Smith, devotion is a “cold” virtue: she can endure in her work because she is convinced of the ethical rectitude of her vision of Black uplift through education. That said, she rarely, unless prompted by Zora, actively antagonizes the white elite of Tooms County.

Zora has a different ethical resource: an inner fire for life and love (including her pious love for her people) that permits her to endure despair. Zora listens to Miss Smith: she returns to her work on the “Silver Fleece” (her cotton), and attempts to sell it to the Cresswells. She is flagrantly defrauded, left penniless by the Cresswells, but this does not cause a return to despair. Rather, “a desperate resolve to find some way up toward the light, if not to it, formed itself within her” (Ibid.). Here we have another element of her mature devotion: a “desperate resolve,” without facile optimism, that flows from a rage for life and love, and enables her continued quest for her “Way.” Having encountered the “ice” constancy embodied by Miss Smith, Zora discovers her own “fire” constancy.

Now, we have two elements of Zora’s mature devotion: a pious love for her people, and a “desperate resolve.” Together, these elements prime her to finally discover her “Way”: in the course of her travels with the worldly Miss Vanderpool, Zora comes across a “little church” where a preacher is giving an impassioned sermon:

Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away sin. Behold the Supreme Sacrifice that makes us clean. Give up your pleasures; give up your wants; give up all to the weak and wretched of our people. Go down to Pharaoh and smite him in God’s name. Go down to the South where we writhe. Strive—work—build—hew—lead—inspire! God calls. Will you hear? (295)

Zora walks to the front of the church, kneels, and declares that she will answer the call. This Black preacher’s call to sacrifice departs from Boldish’s, despite also invoking the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the necessity of righteous work at the expense of individual interest. This latter call, for one, entreats its audience to antagonize the dominant social order, rather than dutifully submit to it. Unlike Boldish’s insistence that Black children learn to love the white planter class, this unnamed Black preacher invokes racial piety through a call to care for the “wretched of our people.” Thus, the righteous work that Zora devotes herself to is work that

places her in direct defiance of the “Pharaohs” of the South, and springs from an abiding affection for her fellows. Zora interprets her “Way” as calling her to a kind of socialist leadership: she pledges to buy the swamp so that it might be owned by Black farmers on a communal basis, thus marking “the beginning of a free community” (362). (In the following section, I’ll discuss in greater detail why Zora interprets her call socialistically). Importantly, the elements of this mature devotion — a self-conscious racial piety, a fiery resolve to endure in her work in the face of myriad trials, and a willingness to antagonize dominant power structures on behalf of a project of racial uplift — cannot, and should not, be interpreted as the elements comprising some transhistorically “correct” account of devotion. This is a devotion in service of a problem, oriented around a project, and its elements are particularly well-suited to the challenge of socialist leadership in the face of environmental racism. After returning to Tooms County, her developed racial piety — which enables her to experience her fellows as “[living] for her in flesh and blood” instead of “[walking] by her like shadows” — orients her toward a deference toward the experiences and desires of the people she intends to lead. Indeed, she sees in them “the vast unorganized power in this mass,” recognizing that they are the ultimate source of any power that might be built through her farm commune scheme (356). Dispositional inclinations like these — loving those one means to lead; understanding the power of one’s endeavor as distributed among a mass — are critical for socialist leaders. They inhibit the growth of a kind of zealous disregard, where socialist leaders impose some blueprint on unwilling participants and will readily sacrifice the interests of the oppressed on behalf of that blueprint.

Zora exhibits the opposite tendency: she only decides that she ought to purchase the swamp after she sits and listens with Tooms County residents “[talking] long about their firesides” (Ibid.). In a scene that precisely mirrors John’s visit to the church in “Of the Coming of

John,” Zora initially fails to arouse the support of a Black congregation because she does not translate her vision of socialistic reform into religious language. However, unlike John, Zora is recognized at a later meeting by an older member of the congregation as possessing a genuine (albeit secular) piety, and he translates for her, saying “what Zora wanted to say” but speaking in their religious language “with absolute confidence and authority” (373). For leaders of socialist projects, Zora’s devotion offers myriad advantages: it enables enduring work despite the opposition that any attempt at genuine social transformation will face, tempers zealous disregard, and can arouse the support of those who recognize the authenticity of one’s affection.

Importantly, each of Zora’s three central virtues contains an ecological valence; that is, each virtue speaks in some way to contemporary environmental politics, or to the development of praiseworthy ecological sensibilities. And indeed, Zora’s mature devotion suggests an ethical practice relevant to contemporary struggles against environmental racism and other forms of environmental injustice. Zora’s devotion culminates in a return: to the people, place, and landscape that she knows best. She is successful because she combines her “worldly” learning with her “local knowledge” of the swamp, cotton production, and the white elite in Tooms County. Take, for example, DuBois’s description of Zora immediately prior to announcing her plan to buy the swamp for a farm commune.

Zora sat hugging her knees and staring out the window toward the sombre ramparts of the swamp. In her eyes lay submarine the madness of long ago; in her brain danced all the dreams and visions of childhood. (362)

There is no chauvinism in Zora’s attachment to the swamp; its “ramparts” are “sombre,” after all, and it has been home to years of “madness.” Zora exhibits no antagonism toward New York to Washington during her travels with Vanderpool. And yet, she returns to the swamp, making it the home for her project of Black uplift. After all, this is the landscape she knows better

than any other, the landscape in which she developed her virtuous visionary capacity. She is especially capable of advancing an innovative political vision in this particular environment because she is well-practiced in engaging this landscape in practices of imaginative play (I will discuss Zora's visionary capacity in much greater detail shortly). I think this kind of "return ethic" — wherein individuals root their ecological activism in familiar landscapes — can be a form of devotion. And indeed, many activists in contemporary environmental justice struggles exhibit something like Zora's landscape devotion. Think, for example, of water defenders, anti-pipeline activists and Chipko "tree huggers." Against those seeking to despoil their environments, members of these political formations enlist rich local knowledges, motivated to endure in their work by their affection for the places they work, live, and play — the places, and people, they know best.

Self-Possession

The project of socialist leadership places tremendous demands on the self. Socialist projects very often fail; successes usually only come after a long string of failures. Devoting oneself to the amelioration of oppression can create severe emotional strains, especially when dealing, as Zora does, with compounding forms of oppression. One's capacity to devote oneself to a cause seems to rely on a capacity to withstand the affective tumult such devotion will occasion. In other words, devotion in service of a socialist project seems to require something like self-possession. This virtue has two primary functions: (1) it permits her to withstand "worldly" influences that would distract her from her call, and (2) it metabolizes the emotions she experiences in the course of her work, transforming those emotions into affects that enable self-giving action. The self-possession that Zora cultivates is not about coldly resisting emotions of

sorrow, anger, and disappointment — it's the virtue that metabolizes those emotions into forms that are motivating rather than disabling.

If this virtue of self-possession regulates Zora's relationship with her emotions, *Quest* also features reflections on virtuous possession of *the land*. There are two tracks to *Quest*'s treatment of possession: one concerning Zora's interiority, the other concerning Zora's relationship with the external, material world. A parallel logic governs both tracks. In the first, Zora achieves self-possession in order to devote herself to Black uplift; in the second, Zora purchases (and thus possesses) the swamp so as to share it with her fellows. The dialectic of possession in *Quest* is thus relevant to eco-socialist practice in two ways: it speaks to the subjectivities of socialist leaders and the ethics of common land ownership.

As with all of her virtues, Zora's self-possession begins with a seed, experiences a negation, and then returns again in mature form. Here, the seed is her almost instinctive rejection of all forms of paternalism. She possesses a real wariness about the motives of putatively well-meaning people who take an interest in her, and so engages in practices of self-withholding. After being greeted by the white teacher Mary Taylor, accompanying Bles into the swamp, Zora responds, simply, "I hates you" (43). Bles, intrigued by Zora, insists that she learn how to read and attend Miss Smith's school. Zora eventually acquiesces — but she wholly refuses the money that Bles offers to pay her tuition (49). However, as her relationship develops with Bles, she abandons her ethic of self-withholding, completely losing herself in her love for Bles and their shared work, the cultivation of cotton in the swamp. When Bles abandons her, Zora feels that nothing remains of herself, absent the object of her love: "'There is no Way!' she insists to Miss Smith. 'You know—I want *him*—I want nothing on earth but him'" (222).

Zora's relationship with Bles leads her from an ethic of withholding, for the purposes of self-protection, to an almost complete dissolution of the self in another. The despair that Bles's abandonment occasions is the primary crucible out of which Zora's mature self-possession emerges. We also encounter deficient versions of self-possession, which undergirds Zora's cultivation of a more promising ethic. Bles is, for the most of the novel, committed to a kind of self-discipline that is ultimately in service of *propriety*: he hopes to achieve a kind of self-mastery in order to conform to a particular standard of independent Black manhood. This is not a self-possession that permits a leader to withstand the pressures of the world so much as a personal comportment meant to impress worldly powers. Another deficient conception of self-possession is offered by Caroline Wynn, an intelligent but cynical middle-class Black woman who provides Bles a "worldly education" in Washington, D.C. politics. When she initially hears Bles speak at a political meeting, she is moved — but she can tell that Bles himself was swept up in the emotion of his address. "If he could thus stir men and not be himself swayed...he would be—invincible," she muses. "But tonight he was moved as greatly as his hearers had been, and that was dangerous" (262). Behind this observation is a vision of self-possession for a rising race leader: the capacity to manipulate the emotions of the crowd while remaining cold to those emotions in oneself.

Zora rejects such interior coldness. After all, if one cultivates a stance of coldness to the emotions that oppression occasions, one risks becoming cold to oppression itself. It is possible to imagine passions that are enabling of socialist transformation, not just disabling. Soon after discovering her way and returning to Alabama, Zora witnesses the horrific eviction of a Black family. Zora feels two visceral emotions: a raging "crimson fire" anger, and "a vast vicarious suffering for the evil of the world" (357). These emotions are, in some real sense, the "correct"

response to what she has witnessed. But if she means to endure in her work, these emotions, in their most visceral form, could risk exhaustion or a “sense of helplessness” that makes “a silence of the world.” It is Zora’s virtue of self-possession that permits her to cool these affects without becoming cold to suffering. She is confident enough in her internal fortitude that she can let “the impotent, futile anger, rage itself out” so that she can “come back again” to her work, in “deadly earnest, to lead these children to the light” (Ibid.). This “deadly earnestness” is not without anger or sorrow — but it is also without a debilitating sense of helplessness. This is the promise of self-possession as a metabolizing virtue — it suggests that one can enlist the affects to give of oneself without annihilating the self.

A parallel dialectic informs Zora’s cultivation of an ethic of communal land ownership. This ethic, ultimately, represents a praiseworthy approach to “possession” of the land in the face of environmental racism. Here, the seed of Zora’s ethic is her rejection of a property claim Mary Taylor makes at the beginning of the novel. Zora steals one of Taylor’s many pins, and when confronted, straightforwardly insists that “folks ain’t got no right to things they don’t need” (79). Zora grounds her rejection of the property claim on a principle of the universal destination of goods: “You don’t own what you...can’t use. God owns it” (Ibid.). For 12-year-old Zora, the possession of property must be oriented around satisfying some genuine need.

Yet, Zora finds great satisfaction in her work cultivating cotton in the swamp with Bles, developing a proprietary attachment to the “Silver Fleece.” In her despair at Bles’s departure, and responding to Miss Smith’s insistence that “work is the only cure” for her pain, Zora returns to the swamp and attempts to sell her bountiful cotton bales to the Cresswells — who promptly declare that Zora is now only \$25 in debt. Indeed, a great deal of the sociological function of *Quest* is to detail the numerous forces preventing Black people from achieving anything like the

Jeffersonian ideal of uplift through small property ownership. In the aftermath of the Fleece's theft, Zora continues to fantasize about possessing her cotton: "To Zora's mind, this beautiful baled fibre was hers; it typified happiness; it was a holy thing which profane hands had stolen." But she begins to reinterpret the form such possession might take.

When Zora returns to Tooms County, she does so in order to pursue her call of Black uplift. Naturally, she concludes that Black uplift must have an ecological valence — in a social order entirely oriented around the cultivation of cotton, oppressed Blacks must forge a new mode of relating to the land. Zora interprets her call socialistically, developing a scheme to purchase the swamp so as to share possession of the land in common. In other words, Zora develops a model for the virtuous possession of a particular landscape (the swamp-turned-farm commune). Zora's socialist interpretation of landscape possession brings together her instinctive suspicion of dominant private property paradigms, her discovery that enjoying the benefits of the fruit of one's hands can be spiritually rewarding, and her recognition that individual property holding will be unsustainably fragile under present conditions. Notably, the plan for the commune permits individual families to purchase their own plots of land, on the condition that they contribute a certain quantity of labor to the collective farm — thus combining the spiritual benefits of individual proprietorship with an orientation toward communal stewardship.

This new mode of possessing the land is not thoroughly secure (the commune almost immediately is forced to repel a white mob). But by enlisting the collective efforts of dozens of people acting in concert, the commune represents a more solid basis on which to enjoy the benefits of working the land. Zora's model of socialist landholding is a genuinely praiseworthy form of possession because it enables her fellows to engage their material surroundings in a way that permits greater flourishing. Indeed, the commune makes use of the land in a way that permits

members to pursue a whole host of spiritually beneficial activities — reading books, enjoying art, engaging in play, and listening and performing music — in addition to work.

Much like DuBois's account of eco-democratic flourishing in *Darkwater*'s 'Credo,' Zora's is a vision that locates polyvalent human flourishing in a flourishing natural environment. Underneath that flourishing is a virtuous ethic of possession. As with her practice of relating to herself, Zora comes to possess parts of the external world so as to share it.

Vision

Zora's developed visionary capacity is, in part, about attention: it enables her to see to the "back of things," grasping the processes, institutions, drives, and affects that organize her environment. In this way, vision is more like a traditional intellectual virtue than devotion or self-possession. But vision is about more than sociological understanding — it's also about *imagination*, the capacity to envision new possibilities for one's environment. The imaginative and perceptual elements work together: Zora's imaginative vision for Black uplift in Tooms County is rooted in a sophisticated perception of the possibilities latent in her environment.

The seed of Zora's vision is her initial capacity for *dreaming*. The dialectic of vision in *Quest* begins with Zora's dreaming, runs through her sociological and humanistic education, and eventually combines her desire to see to the "back of things" with a striving to dream something new. One of the first things we learn about young Zora is that she lives in a world of dreams, that she believes that "there ain't nothing but dreams—that is, nothing much" (19). Zora inhabits a world that, despite its darkness and cruelty, permits moments of imaginative fancy. Bles sees in Zora's dreaming a real desire for intellectual enlargement, a "visionary tenderness" and a "striving for unknown things" (45). Zora, from a very young age, desires more. DuBois in other

texts praises the practice of dreaming as essential to human flourishing. As we have already seen in *Darkwater*'s utopian Credo, DuBois imagines the "Liberty" of human beings" thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love." Working without dreaming is dead — or at the very least, insufficient to DuBois's ideals of liberty and flourishing.

That said, Zora's early imaginative posture is sometimes detached from the realities of her environment. The drama of *Quest*'s second act is Zora's education, wherein she puts her desire for intellectual and imaginative enlargement in service of socio-environmental understanding. A great deal of this education takes place when Zora becomes the personal servant of Miss Vanderpool, a worldly northern aristocrat whose chief intellectual mode is languid complacency. Vanderpool, in some sense, shows Zora the world — she takes her to New York and Washington, and provides her stacks of classic humanistic texts. Yet she has none of the desire for intellectual enlargement that Zora demonstrates in these chapters. A characteristic exchange between the two takes place back in Tooms County:

"What is the world like?" asked Zora.

Mrs. Vanderpool smiled. "Oh, I meant great active cities and buildings, myriads of people and wonderful sights."

"Yes—but back of it all, what is it really? What does it look like?"

"Heavens, child! Don't ask. Really, it isn't worth while peering back of things. One is sure to be disappointed" (222).

From dreaming to a desire to see to the "back of things": here marks the transition from Zora's childhood to her more grounded perceptual training. Beneath both modes lies a kind of intellectual *eros*: a belief that there is more going on in the world than what first meets the eye, and an overriding passion to grasp that "more." Zora's learning represents a complex transformation of her dreaming practice more than a simple negation. Zora's intellectual practice — even her hours spent contemplating the canonical texts of the West — theorizes in the light of her own experience

and the problems facing her own community. In her imagination, legends of antiquity come to populate the landscapes she knows best (the “sculptured glories of Phidias” now sit in “the splendor of the swamp”). But truly seeing to the back of things requires leaving her study and returning home. Zora boards the train to return to Toomsville and is luxuriating in an intellectual reverie when she is interrupted by a harsh white conductor demanding her ticket. She is taken aback — conductors had been polite to her when she was with Vanderpool — and her jarring reimmersion into a white supremacist social order permits her to grasp the role of *white* fear (in this case, of being perceived as having been courteous to a Black woman) in undergirding racial abuse. This key discovery is won because Zora refuses to become a ‘car window’ sociologist.³⁹

Bles and Zora are educated by two different “worldly” women, Vanderpool and Caroline Wynn. Both offer a visionary capacity that is ultimately incomplete. Vanderpool’s visionary practice is deficient because, even though she is embedded in the world, she ultimately finds it all dull; she is without intellectual *eros*. Wynn, on the other hand, has a perceptive grasp of the way race organizes her social environment. She possesses the “attention” component of the virtue of vision; what is lacking is her capacity for imagination, for locating possibilities latent in a deplorable order. She is a cynic. Wynn has a deep belief in the unchangeability of negative white appraisals of Black people; thus, despite her intelligence and ambition, she accomplishes her (limited) ends by making herself appear docile and slow. This practice has the unhappy effect of *reinforcing* white beliefs about Black docility and inferiority — which only confirms for Wynn the rightness of her cynicism. Zora, as we will see, offers a better model.

Before returning to Zora’s mature visionary capacity, I want to briefly discuss a deficient form of aesthetic perception. *Quest* suggests that a significant source of power for the Southern

³⁹ This phrase is used as a description of poor sociological practice by DuBois in “Of the Black Belt” in *Souls*.

planter class is *aesthetic*. For individuals like Mary Taylor, the trappings of the Southern aristocracy — the gardens, estates, and refined manners — are profoundly alluring (so alluring to Taylor, in fact, that she marries into the Cresswell family before ultimately discovering the indulgent meanness underneath Southern manners). Miss Smith, in contrast, models resistance to the aesthetic power of the planter class as an ethical practice. Taken aback by the beauty of the Cresswell estate, Smith collects herself: “Yes, there were signs of taste and wealth. ‘But it was built on a moan,’ cried Miss Smith to herself, passionately, and she would not look round any more” (141). There is an aesthetic dimension to this resistance: the brutal exploitation underneath grandeur of the Cresswell estate is not just ethically deplorable but *ugly*. Smith offers us a model example of seeing to the back of things — to the practices and processes beneath mere appearance — that reincorporates an ethical appraisal into one’s aesthetic sensibility. A properly trained eye ought to recoil at the sight of the Cresswell estate.

In the novel’s final act, back in Toomsville, Zora deepens her perceptual capacity. Her development is, in large part, thanks to her newfound virtue of *devotion*: she is able to see her environment clearly because she sees with loving eyes. She gazes “on her world with [a] keener vision”; “when love was shaken all things moved,” DuBois writes, but now that her devotion has been developed, she can finally grasp “the real and mighty world” (355). The virtue of devotion completes the virtue of vision for several reasons. First, Zora’s love for her people motivates her to *understand* her people: their sorrows, their spiritual strivings. Second, affection for her fellows occasions the desire that they should flourish — and real anger when oppression interrupts their flourishing. That anger (metabolized by the virtue of self-possession) motivates a project: studying her social landscape for points of leverage and *imagining* a mode of socio-ecological existence that could enable greater flourishing. Zora’s vision in *Quest* describes both her perceptual capacity and

the specific model of Black uplift that she imagines. Zora's political imagination is nothing less than her capacity for dreaming placed in the practical service of those she loves. *Quest* concludes, in utopian fashion, with Zora's love realized, both with Bles and with the members of the farm commune. Fittingly, it also concludes with dreams; Zora, DuBois tells us, is "dreaming again. Somehow, the old dream-life, with its glorious phantasies, had come silently back, richer and sweeter than ever" (430).

By way of conclusion, I want to discuss how Zora comes to perceive the natural world, since I think it represents a sophisticated contribution to contemporary debates in environmental political theory about the status of nature. Does Zora come to see a *distinction* between the social and the ecological, between the human and the more-than-human? Throughout *Quest*, the natural world is depicted as lively, and Zora is depicted as particularly sensitive to that liveliness; as she cultivates cotton, she kisses its "verdant tenderness" and engages in frequent conversation with swamp creatures (121). For that reason, *Quest* may appear congenial to a "new materialist" emphasis on the quasi-agentic power of the material world. After all, in *Quest* the natural world is frequently described in vital terms; both human beings and features of the environment tremble, quiver and shiver.⁴⁰

Critics of the new materialist read of *Quest* argue that, in his description of the liveliness of cotton, DuBois is actually dramatizing the phenomenology of the commodity fetish; ultimately, *Quest* is about human beings attempting to transcend the fetish, making use of the natural world for human ends. "It is not useful to understand cotton as having independent agency capable of transcending and correcting human affairs," Wolff (2023) argues, "since cotton's emancipatory power is always inflected, and usually hindered, by...networks of capital." This reading, despite its

⁴⁰ See Class 2022.

real merits, can underplay the sense in which Zora perceives the natural world as genuinely *peopled* by more-than-human entities. Zora articulates this view in a fascinating exchange with Vanderpool, as the two of them gaze out onto New York's Fifth Avenue.

"It reminds me of the swamp," she said.

Mrs. Vanderpool, just returned from a shopping tour, burst into laughter.

"It is—but I marvel at your penetration."

"I mean, it is moving—always moving."

"The swamp seemed to me unearthly still."

"Yes—yes," cried Zora, eagerly, brushing back the rumpled hair; "and so did the city, at first, to me."

"Still! New York?"

"Yes. You see, I saw the buildings and forgot the men; and the buildings were so tall and silent against Heaven. And then I came to see the people, and suddenly I knew the city was like the swamp, always restless and changing."

"And more beautiful?" suggested Mrs. Vanderpool...

"Oh, no; not nearly so beautiful. And yet—more interesting." Then with a puzzled look: "I wonder why?"

"Perhaps because it's people and not things."

"It's people in the swamp," asserted Zora, dreamily, smoothing out the pillows of the couch, "'little people,' I call them. The difference is, I think, that there I know how the story will come out; everything is changing, but I know how and why and from what and to what. Now here, *everything* seems to be happening; but what is it that is happening?" (DuBois 1911, 246).

Here, Vanderpool posits a sharp distinction between "people" and "things," and meets Zora's resistance. "Little people" live in the swamp, too, and these little people have a liveliness to them; the swamp, after all, is "moving—always moving." That said, Zora resists a strong monism: there is a difference between the swamp's "little people" and New Yorkers, and that difference lies in a capacity to decide to do something new. With the "little people" of the swamp, Zora knows "how the story will come out," even amid constant movement. But — and this is the critical

distinction for Zora — with human affairs, the end of the story has not been written: human beings can decide that their form of life is insufficient to their flourishing, and do something new together. The “little people,” despite their liveliness, lack this capacity. However, the animacy of more-than-human forces is not to be underestimated, and it can certainly undermine human efforts. A torrential rain very nearly destroys the “Fleece” that Bles and Zora first cultivate; Zora’s barely successful efforts to drain the floodwaters almost kill her. An entity like the swamp is not a consistent friend or foe; it is, at different junctures, a site of Black exploitation and resistance.

The ethical character of a given natural environment is, for DuBois, largely a function of what human beings are up to in it. As we have seen, DuBois believes that intercourse with nature is a critical component of a flourishing human life. Successful intercourse is enabled by what Kimberly Smith describes as a creative responsiveness: a capacity to perceive nature in its liveliness and complexity while also, with appropriate care, “modify[ing] it to make it an appropriate home for humans.” This creative responsiveness is an apt description of the ecological ethic Zora enacts in the swamp. While protecting her Fleece from hungry creatures, she speaks to rabbit “little people” with earnest care:

“Brer Rabbit—poor little Brer Rabbit, don’t you know you mustn’t eat Zora’s cotton? Naughty, naughty Brer Rabbit.” And then she would show it where she had gathered piles of fragrant weeds for it and its fellows (125).

The cultivation of the Fleece is, in the last analysis, an effort to make use of the swamp for emancipatory *human* ends. But it can only succeed with Zora’s rich knowledge of the swamp and its more-than-human “little people.” She is able to protect the Fleece from “Brer Rabbit” and his fellows because she is responsive to those little people, offering them an alternative source of sustenance. Zora’s ecological practices are not hands-off: cotton cultivation and the establishment of the commune requires killing plants, enlisting “axes and saws and hammers” to

clear swampland (375). But the promise of her ecological ethic is that these human interventions can be undertaken with a measure of respect, preserving the basic integrity of the landscape. Indeed, the transformed swamp is, in some ways, “a swamp in name only”; and yet, the novel’s joyful conclusion proclaims, as Zora and Bles embrace, that “the swamp was living, vibrant, tremulous” (433). It retains its integrity amid its transformation into an appropriate home for emancipated human sociality.

Conclusion

As with Chapter One, we conclude with a glimmer of genuine flourishing. Describing the operation of Zora’s commune, DuBois writes:

Down in the swamp, at the edge of the cleared space, had risen a log cabin; long, low, spacious, overhung with oak and pine. It was Zora’s center for her settlement work. There she lived, and with her a half-dozen orphan girls and children too young for the boarding department of the school.

The rooms of the cottage were clean and light, supplied with books and pictures, simple toys, and a phonograph. The yard was one wide green and golden playground, and all day the music of children’s glad crooning and the singing of girls went echoing and trembling through the trees, as they played and sewed and washed and worked (1911, 379).

Much like DuBois’s account of eco-democratic sociality in *Darkwater*’s ‘Credo,’ this passage marks the culmination of a vision that locates polyvalent human flourishing in a flourishing natural environment. Critically, Zora’s commune is an achievement that is born of empowerment. The flourishing of the commune is only possible because Zora and her comrades have taken authority over their form of life into their own hands, against the disempowering forces of environmental racism. For an eco-socialist civic virtue, an orientation toward life’s flourishing means demanding a democratic say over the human-nature relationship. Disempowerment, ultimately, is hostile to life itself.

The free commune is one of Zora's crucial achievements in *Quest*. The other is the ethic that emerges out of her self-cultivation. After all, Zora's virtues—devotion, self-possession, and vision—hang together in a loose ethical system. Realizing one's devotion in abiding practical activity requires self-possession; without it, leaders risk despair and burnout. Self-possession without genuine devotion can express itself in the kind of callous leadership endorsed by Caroline Wynn. Vision, as we have just seen, is completed through devotion: devotion motivates the imaginative practices that are crucial to a mature visionary capacity. In *Quest*, Zora leaves us with a model for the ethical life of a radical eco-political actor. This model, too, is one of empowerment. Zora's virtues enable her passage from extreme deprivation to political leadership.

How, as 21st-century readers, should we receive these virtues? The virtues respond to dilemmas of radical leadership that are in many ways timeless. How can I maintain appropriate fidelity toward those I mean to lead? How can I endure in working on behalf of a project whose success is unlikely to come quickly, if at all? How can I learn to “read” a political conjuncture? It is hard to imagine a radical leader agitating successfully against environmental racism in the 21st century who had nothing in the way of devotion, self-possession, or vision.

But, as I've consistently emphasized, virtues, for DuBois, can be creatively refashioned in response to particular environmental conditions. The conditions facing the characters of *Quest* rhyme with contemporary conditions of environmental racism. Thus, the ecological aspects of Zora's virtues — the commitment to returning to the landscapes one knows best; the mode of taking possession so as to share it; the practices of ecological attention — can contribute to contemporary theories of environmental ethics. That said, Zora's conditions are, of course, not precisely our own. For that reason, contemporary environmental leaders are likely to exhibit a

devotion of a somewhat different sort; they are likely to cultivate the capacity to see landscapes beyond the plantation or the swamp.

And then there is the matter of *Quest*'s form. We are dealing, here, with a novel with a utopian bent. Unlike the titular character in DuBois's "Of the Coming of John," Zora does not perish: she finds love, successfully repels a white mob, and begins a free community with her fellows. Her virtues issue in successful action. This novel is not entirely without moral remainder, but moral remainder is less haunting here than in other DuBoisian texts. *Quest* could be fairly accused of rendering Zora's virtues a little *too* unburdened. The dialectical progression of Zora's ethical formation — from dreaming to vision, from inchoate piety to mature devotion — might proceed more cleanly than ethical formation occurs under radically imperfect conditions.

This chapter has narrated Zora's story as one of successful ethical formation, issuing in political and personal happiness. But Zora's is a fragile happiness. The farm commune is an experiment whose long-term success is anything but guaranteed. Zora is a very young woman about to marry a man whose capacity for long-term commitment is unproven. She has developed certain virtues, and they are undoubtedly admirable, but ethical formation does not conclude once one has reached one's twenties. Zora herself leaves us with the right bit of parting wisdom. To a delighted Mary Taylor declaring victory — "Well, the battle's over, isn't it?" — Zora insists, "No, it's just begun" (430). Zora, at *Quest*'s end, emphasizes the open-ended character of her achievements, commune and ethic alike.

Perhaps the open-ended character of Zora's example can itself be empowering. An acceptance of virtue's burdened character means that impossible ethical standards ought no longer to immobilize us. An acceptance of ethical hybridity means no longer demanding perfect fidelity to tradition. Zora models a practice whereby we might transform ourselves to enable struggles against

environmental injustice. With her as an example, we look to the past with piety and to diverse others with curiosity, working on our souls as we aim to answer that ultimate political question:

What is to be done?

CHAPTER THREE: AN ECO-POLITICS THAT MOVES: UNDOMESTICATED LOVE AND TRAVELING ACTIVISM IN ANNA TSING

Introduction

At this point, several elements of an eco-socialist civic virtue have started to emerge. With Luxemburg, we have specified the socialist orientation of such an ethic; with DuBois, we have emphasized its burdened and hybrid character. Through a pair of narrations, we have drawn out virtues—resilience and sympathy; devotion, self-possession, and vision—that enable the overcoming of despair and disempowerment, guided by an ultimate orientation to life’s flourishing. The problem that animates Chapter Three is disorientation. How can we begin to initiate action on behalf of life on earth when our picture of the world is radically unstable? One root of disorientation, I suggest, is the experience of indeterminacy. The experience of indeterminacy can be radically destabilizing, resulting in a disabling form of disorientation. In narrating a way through disorientation, I turn to the work of anthropologist Anna Tsing on the Matsutake mushroom. Disorientation oftentimes occasions a desire to domesticate and control. But a different response is possible: a response grounded in love. My treatment of love draws out the undomesticated character of an eco-socialist civic virtue. This ethic is undomesticated in two senses: it rejects the desire to subject nature to paternal forms of control, and it is cultivated on the move.

The prior two chapters have been organized around individual narratives. The current chapter is a little different. The core of my reading of Tsing narrates her own cultivation of a virtue of love in response to disorientation, through her encounter with a bevy of mushroom aficionados. From there, however, I offer a profusion of movement narratives, spanning the American West, urban Japan, and rural Indonesia. These undomesticated virtues, I hope to show,

animate the activity of political collectivities, not just individuals. Love, on my account, is a politically demanding ideal. With that, let us begin.

“What do you do when your world starts to fall apart?” asks Anna Tsing in her (2015) text *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (1). Ours is an era of disorientation, characterized by unpredictable environmental phenomena and the collapse of master stories that have guided political and social life for centuries. This disorientation — this sense that the world is unstable, indeterminate, unpredictable— is, in part, historically contingent: it stems from chaotic capitalist dynamics, roiling political crises, and social dislocations. However, a massive literature in environmental scholarship has insisted that indeterminacy and entanglement are general features of worldly existence (Barad 2007; Haraway 2007; Bennett 2010; Kohn 2013; Tsing 2015; van Dooren 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). Working to displace dominant binaries — between nature and society, human freedom and natural necessity — this literature characterizes human life as embedded in indeterminate landscapes we cannot fully understand or control. Many of these scholars suggest that human beings might navigate their landscapes in a more ethical way if they come to understand their entangled and indeterminate character. Van Dooren (2016), for example, writes that “knowing and living are deeply entangled,” suggesting that an awareness of our embeddedness in multispecies relationships might offer a “basis for crafting better possibilities for shared life” (17).

But this move — from an ontology of entanglement to a more decent multispecies ethics — is too quick. For those of us who hope to gain a sense of rootedness out of our environmental attachments, indeterminacy offers unwelcome disorientation. Disorientation can produce delight, to be sure, but it can also produce terror, repression, and world-rejection (Cavell 2015). Tsing’s endeavor in *Mushroom* and related texts is to *train* readers to receive the messiness of their

landscapes ethically, to find “pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy” (2015, 1). In this sense, the mushroom writings represent a profound work of rhetoric, aiming to move readers to join Tsing in occupying a new sensory, affective, and ethical horizon. Tsing’s rhetoric is grounded in the exemplar method: she introduces us to a plural array of mushroom lovers, and hopes that they can help us learn to free our environmental affections from domesticating urges. She wants us to love our particular attachments like mushroom lovers do, which means first helping us work through the discomforts of indeterminacy. These discomforts ultimately open us up to deeper pleasures: the pleasures of love without the drive to control. Notably, however, Tsing also narrates *her own* encounter with mushrooms and those who love them, modeling a process of self-cultivation in the face of disorientation. In this way, I suggest, Tsing offers herself as an exemplar—one who is exemplary precisely in her willingness to learn from other mushroom-loving exemplars.

I narrate Tsing as cultivating a kind of love— which I’m calling undomesticated love — that could guide a more ethical navigation of our landscapes. This account emerges from Tsing’s own effort to love the Matsutake mushroom, but it travels beyond the fungal. Undomesticated love is undomesticated because it refuses the domestication of the object of one’s affection; it is also undomesticated because it is cultivated through practices of landscape wandering. Love, for Tsing, is a virtue: it must be learned and features a dynamic relationship between loving affects and loving practices. It combines an “open yet focused attention” (Tsing 2010, 194), habits of self-restraint, and an orientation toward the cultivation of “livable [multispecies] collaborations” (2015, 28). This is a virtue that moves, in two different senses: it is feverishly passionate, and it refuses confinement.

Undomesticated love suggests an obverse. What would it mean to speak of environmental love as *domesticated*? Our affections become domesticated when we seek mastery over the object of our affection, when we fail to recognize that even non-human others have worldmaking projects independent of us (Tsing 2010). Critically, the domestication of our eco-affections occurs when we fail to acknowledge the essential indeterminacy of the landscapes we traverse.

Undomesticated love has an additional benefit: it helps us theorize the relationship between a radical eco-politics and the sentimental affections individuals have for local environmental features. Think of a city office worker who always cuts through a beloved local park walking to his job, even though it adds several minutes to his commute. Or the middle schooler who enjoys staring at a certain tree through her classroom window, choosing to daydream rather than subtract fractions. For my part, I have special affection for a large rock beside a creek in my hometown; whenever I visit my parents, I make a pilgrimage.

These kinds of sentimental affections are widely felt (Gaekwad et al. 2022; Scannell and Gifford 2010; Knaps et al. 2022)—but should we expect them to ground a more capacious environmental consciousness? There’s good reason for doubt. In one study, Shannon Elizabeth Bell (2016) profiles central Appalachian women with abiding affections for particular mountain ecologies—but who nonetheless maintain a deep hostility to the politics of environmentalism. Local expressions of environmental love are often politically inconsequential. After all, it is not immediately clear how the desire to maintain the health of a beloved local creek would make one likelier to agitate for broad decarbonization. Local eco-affections can even fuel reactionary political efforts, where privileged people seek to maintain exclusive access to environmental benefits at the expense of subordinated groups (Bhardwaj 2023). There may be something sinister about these quotidian environmental loves, rooted in a sense that certain ecological

features are *for* us, and thus rightly subject to a paternal kind of control. After all, as decades of feminist and queer theory demonstrate, love and domination are deeply entangled (Firestone 1970; Benjamin 1988). In other words, such local eco-affections animate the urge to domesticate.

It's therefore unsurprising that the celebration of local eco-affections—despite having a long history in environmental thought (Berry 1977; Sanders 1994; Rousseau 1992)—sits uncomfortably with contemporary environmental political theory. To locate political hope in the love an individual has for a given tree seems old-fashioned.

Yet, that is what I intend to do in this chapter. Undomesticated love allows us to take on board forms of local eco-affection while avoiding concerns around provincialism and irrelevance. As I narrate it, this virtue culminates in the work of collective action on the level of the landscape. But does undomesticated love scale? What is its *political* upshot? The Tsing of the mushroom writings evinces little hope that political movements could directly challenge the processes destroying the planet. The politics of the latter Tsing models multispecies refuge without an account of multispecies insurgence. But we need not join Tsing in this respect. In fact, I argue that undomesticated love prepares individuals for the work of radical environmental politics.

Tsing was once more optimistic about political insurgence. In the second part of this chapter, I turn to *Friction*, her (2005) study of Indonesian environmental politics. Here, Tsing narrates the rise of the Indonesian environmental movement under the regime of General Suharto, a fugitive environmental formation—operating in authoritarian conditions—that nonetheless aimed to reconstitute the polity. Operating in the lineage of Gramsci and Hall, Tsing traces the process by which activists challenged the 'New Order' hegemony of Suharto's regime by engaging in practices of articulation, oriented toward the development of a new kind of

political subject: Indonesian environmentalist.⁴¹ These activists evinced a consistent set of practices and habits of mind, which I call the ‘virtues of articulation’ aimed at creating political space amid the disorientations of political life. Out of my reading of *Friction* emerges a political ethic—bringing together practices of translation, the canny interplay of dominant discourses, and a mode of attention for ‘reading’ one’s political conjuncture—that might guide environmentalists in our increasingly disorienting political moment.

The upshot of my reading of *Friction* is to claim that the articulative virtues are prefigured by the practice of undomesticated love. Learning to love like mushroom lovers readies us for political insurgence. After all, undomesticated love is a school of vision and collaboration; it prepares us for the disorientations of political struggle. The articulative virtues and undomesticated love, while not identical, are twin ethics. To love our landscapes means to demand, enlisting the articulative virtues, political protections against unchecked human power. To agitate for political power requires the capacity to ‘read’ social and ecological landscapes, a capacity instilled by undomesticated love. My narrations in this chapter culminate in a radical environmentalism of love that joins political sophistication and the mobilization of diverse constituencies with a sensitive landscape-based ethical practice.

Traces of such an environmentalism are already with us. In the final section of this chapter, I briefly narrate protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline as a parable of radical political articulation grounded in undomesticated love. These pipeline protests demonstrate that

⁴¹ “Stuart Hall’s idea about the role of articulation in the formation of new political subjects is helpful,” Tsing (2015) writes, in her gloss on Hall’s theory: “New political subjects form, he argues, as pre-existing groups link and, through linking, enunciate new identities and interests” (77). For background on Hall’s account of articulation, see: Hall 1980; Gilbert 2019; Clarke 2015.

place-based love can disclose political articulations that mobilize, coalescing traveling movements in defense of a livable planet.

To Love a Mushroom

The Mushroom at the End of the World begins in disorientation. What does Tsing do when her world starts to fall apart? “I go for a walk,” she writes, “and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms” (2015, 1). Amid the instability of contemporary life, mushrooms delight Tsing because they pull her back into her senses, popping up unexpectedly, reminding her of the pleasures to be found in a turbulent landscape (1). The gambit of Tsing’s mushroom research project is that following the trajectory of Matsutake mushrooms through global supply chains can help explain a great deal about the relationship between landscape ecology and political economy. Following mushrooms — and those who have a feverish affection for them — can also illustrate the kind of love that makes sense for our ecological conjuncture. A (2010) Tsing essay features two titles: “Arts of Inclusion, or How to Love a Mushroom.” Mushroom lovers, it turns out, are particularly well-trained at practicing “arts of inclusion that call to others,” oriented toward cultivating relations of mutual flourishing (2010, 192). But what is it about mushroom-loving that supplies this ethical training?

Mushroom profiles mushroom aficionados pursuing a bounty of fungal practices. Tsing’s rhetorical approach in this text is grounded in an ‘exemplar approach’ to ethical formation, where we learn how to act precisely through encountering those who model the virtue of undomesticated love. We meet a Danish academic pouring over dusty mushroom herbaria, a celebrated composer writing music helping us to ‘hear’ the silent shooting of mushroom spores, a veteran from Louisiana hoping to build a democratic mushroom science, and a Kyoto volunteer

organization enlisting mushroom fever to revitalize the countryside. Many of these mushroom lovers have attachments to beloved foraging spots. Mushroom foraging is a wandering activity, but it's a grounded kind of wandering. Take Hiro, an elder Japanese American, for whom the forest is a repository of memory and history, "layered on the landscape, threaded in and out the spots we check for new life emerging" (Tsing 2015, 245). This history is ecological, reflecting memories of storms, flooding, and erosion (244). But it is also social:

He points out the window, "That's Roy's matsutake hunting place; over there it's Henry's special spot." Only later do I realize that both Roy and Henry are deceased. But they live on in Hiro's map of the forest, recalled every time he passes their spots. Hiro teaches younger people how to hunt for mushrooms, and with the skill comes the memory (244).

Hiro's attachment to his beloved forest is moving. But what, ultimately, can someone like him—an old man who enjoys walking through a familiar landscape—teach us about the possibility of life in capitalist ruins? What is so special about mushroom lovers, and what might they have to teach the rest of us? Wild mushroom foragers, Tsing writes,

praise [mushrooms'] unexpected bounty, their colors, tastes, and smells, and their promise of a livelihood from the woods. How many times have foragers told me of the heat of 'mushroom fever,' which drives them to dodge their other obligations to take up the wild thrill of the chase? (192)

These people—by virtue of their fungal passion—can teach us something about constructing 'livable worlds.' If we open ourselves to their wisdom, we can learn to love our own landscapes in a way that refuses the rage to control. Mushroom loving is a school of environmental ethics. Out of this inquiry into the ethics of mushroom loving will emerge an account of undomesticated love, a virtue that combines a full-body receptivity to the shocks of encounter, an 'open yet focused' attention, practices of self-restraint and landscape wandering, and, ultimately, an orientation toward livable multispecies collaborations. Suddenly, environmental love is not the passive enjoyment of an inert landscape but an ethic of collective

action. This virtue grows out of environmental pleasure but is resilient to disappointment and pain; undomesticated love culminates in a disposition to multispecies flourishing even in pleasure's absence.

Mushroom lovers' central agility is a capacity to collaborate amid indeterminacy, in the face of disorientation. This capacity separates practitioners of undomesticated love from those whose eco-loves are domesticated. Tsing begins *Mushroom* with the experience of indeterminacy, the experience of the world as unpredictable and disorienting. Tsing's mushroom writings hope to prepare readers for the cultivation of mutualistic collaborations across species divides. However, the cultivation of such relationships requires indeterminate encounters with difference. Loving matsutake mushrooms, it turns out, requires a particularly sensitive receptivity to encounter; if we can learn to receive matsutake, we might learn to receive all manner of living, shocking things. Encounters with difference are "by their nature, indeterminate" because they transform us in a way that we cannot anticipate (2015, 46). She analogizes encounter to smell, as "smell, unlike air, is a sign of the presence of another, to which we are already responding" (2015, 46). Smell, like encounter, can be a shock, producing disgust as well as delight. The Matsutake mushroom has a notoriously shocking smell. "It's not an easy smell," Tsing admits. "It's not like a flower or a mouth-watering food. It's disturbing. Many people never learn to love it" (2015, 14). In this way, learning to love the smell of the Matsutake offers a particularly intense sensory guide to the indeterminacy of encounter. Tsing herself had to be trained to love its aroma—and she hopes to train readers to love it in turn:

The first time I cooked them, they ruined an otherwise lovely stir-fry. The smell was overwhelming. I couldn't eat it. I threw the whole pan away and ate my rice plain. (2015, 47)

In her disgust, Tsing describes reaching out to a Japanese friend who shows her how to prepare Matsutake properly:

It was marvelous! The smell had begun to delight me. Over the next few weeks, my senses changed. It was an amazing year for matsutake here, and they were everywhere. Now, whenever I caught a whiff, I felt happy. (2015, 48)

I hope to make two claims about Tsing's ethics of aroma. First, receptivity to encounter must be trained in a way that reaches into the senses. Openness to the other is a full-body capacity, not some abstract ethical principle. Learning to love the smell of Matsutake prefigures an openness to diverse collaborations across species divides. Second, there is something egalitarian about Tsing's rhetoric in these passages. While the capacity to love Matsutake smell must be learned, it can be learned while preserving equality between teacher and student. Tsing does not hold herself apart from the reader as some sage; rather, she models her own initial insensitivity to Matsutake. To receive her sensory training, she turns to an equal, a friend, and then turns to the reader with humility, inviting them to join her in inhabiting a more sensitive sensory-affective-ethical horizon. In this way, Tsing offers herself as an exemplar—but her exemplarity lies precisely in her openness to learning from wise others.

In addition to this sensory receptivity, mushroom-loving generates the capacity to pay attention to indeterminate landscapes. Tsing's exemplars are mushroom lovers who come, through their passionate fungal engagement, to embody some virtue. The experimental composer John Cage, Tsing (2010) informs us, was one such mushroom lover—one particularly adept in virtues of noticing. Cage "believed noticing mushrooms and noticing sounds in music were related skills" (194). Matsutake mushrooms cannot be cultivated by human beings—they pop up in surprising places, modeling the indeterminacy of our landscapes. Cage's music is similarly indeterminate; he wanted to force listeners to "attend to all the sounds around them, whether

composed or incidental” (Tsing 2010, 194). The training one receives loving mushrooms generates an attention that is “open yet focused” (194)—focused enough to discern difficult landscape rhythms, open enough to be surprised.

Thinking with Cage, Tsing analogizes the attention required to grasp the relationships that form a given landscape to the attention required to listen to difficult music, especially polyphonic music (2019, 233). Polyphony features the “intertwin[ing]” of autonomous melodies; the novice listener must be trained to “pick out separate, simultaneous melodies and to listen for the moments of harmony and dissonance” (233). Our landscapes feature similar moments of harmony and dissonance, as diverse beings pursue their lifeways, engaging, consciously or unconsciously, in surprising collaborations. In *Mushroom*, Tsing writes like one trying to get a friend to listen to a difficult genre of music: She wants us to look, listen, and smell carefully because she loves Matsutake, and wants us to love them too, and knows that our attentional powers will only be heightened once we learn to love. She is convinced that mushrooms will sweep us off our feet if we only learn how to pay attention—after all, “a good many of those few who do notice fungi love them with a breathless passion” (Tsing 2010, 192).

Many feminist and queer theory scholars criticize love-based ethics for authorizing subordination in the household. In an environmental context, emphasizing the loves we have for features of our landscapes may raise fears that such loves are contingent on human mastery. Tsingian love is responsive to these concerns; indeed, Tsing (2012) acknowledges, “domination, domestication, and love are deeply entangled” (141).⁴² Mushrooms are found outside the garden or plantation, amid “the bounteous diversity of roadside margins” (2012, 141). Mushrooms are the mirror plant to cereals: mushroom affection models undomesticated love of nature, while

⁴² For another effort to develop a love concept responsive to the critique from queer theory, see Maxwell 2025.

love of cereals—“one of the great romances of human history”—domesticated *us* (145).

Mushrooms, unlike cereals, cannot be cultivated using the techniques of plantation agriculture, a model of multispecies relationship that is deficient because it “remove[s] the love” (2012, 148). One cannot properly love a mushroom unless one refuses the domestication of the other. Rather, the mushroom lover, upon encountering the object of affection, reacts with delight at “the undeserved bounty of the gift,” embracing within our indeterminate landscapes “the pleasures of the unasked for and the unexpected” (2012, 142). Central to the ethics of undomesticated love are practices of self-restraint, and mushrooms—with their resistance to domestication—teach us self-restraint. “For those who love wild mushrooms, full mastery is not the goal; indeterminacy is part of the point” (Tsing 2010, 201).

This love is undomesticated in another sense: it is achieved through practices of landscape wandering. Wandering, after all, is an essentially non-instrumentalizing orientation. The wanderer seeks only surprise and delight at her surroundings, not control. “Wandering and love of mushrooms engender each other,” Tsing (2012) writes. “Walking is the speed of bodily pleasure and contemplation; it is also just the speed to look for mushrooms” (141). Loving mushrooms teaches us how to react to the shocking with an orientation toward awe, rather than a drive to control. Mushroom lovers teach us how to let our eco-affections wander.

We began this chapter by offering reasons to doubt that local eco-affections could ground an emancipatory eco-politics. Ursula K. Heise (2008) criticizes traditions that emphasize a ‘sense of place’—an ethic of curiosity and care for one’s proximate landscapes—as the core environmentalist sensibility. These traditions celebrate rootedness as a “founding ideological principle” for bringing us closer to nature (2008, 21). But Heise thinks this is a mistake: there’s nothing essentially more natural about staying put—mobility is just as much a part of human

history as staying put (2008, 31). But mushroom lovers complicate Heise's suspicion of local eco-affections. While their affections are often rooted in a particular locale, the expression of undomesticated love is mobile, activated by wandering. Take Hiro, the Matsutake enthusiast for whom the forest is an archive of memory—Tsing takes pains to insist that his is a “kind of memory [that] requires motion” (2015, 245). Undomesticated love is not the passive appreciation of a stable landscape; it's a nomadic intimacy, close to the ground but on the move.

This ethic, while containing practices of self-restraint, is an ideal that is completed in activity. Ecological love is ultimately a work of collective action. Matsutake mushrooms cannot be cultivated, and they only tend to grow in ecologies that have been disturbed—by glaciers, volcanoes, or human beings. Mushroom lovers recognize their dependence on more-than-human processes, but this need not “enforce paralysis” (Tsing 2015, 257). Take Kyoto's Matsutake Crusaders, a group of volunteers engaging in a “perhaps-useful landscape disturbance” in a particular beloved landscape (258). By actively participating in their landscape, they hope to “stimulate a latent commons, that is, an eruption of shared assembly,” Tsing writes, “even as they know they can't actually *make* a commons” (2015, 258). The Crusaders must forge new relationships with an abundance of landscape denizens; thus, undomesticated love starts with Matsutake for the Crusaders but travels beyond. Over time, these Crusaders begin to delight in the diverse bounty emerging in a disturbed forest; a narrow mushroom fever transforms, through non-instrumentalizing practices of disturbance and attention, into a more capacious environmental sensibility.

Many of the volunteers were retired people, but there were also students, housewives, and salaried employees willing to give up free weekends. Some had private forestland, and they were learning how to manage their own pines. One showed pictures of his *satoyama* forest, which had won several prizes for its beauty. In the spring, his hillsides were bedecked with the blossoms of wild cherries and azaleas. **Even if no matsutake**

appeared, he explained, he was happy to be participating in this reconstructed woodland. [emphasis mine] (Tsing 2015, 259).

As this volunteer models, undomesticated love is not a dyadic mutualism between human beings and Matsutake. It encompasses embedded practices oriented toward the stimulation of multispecies collaborations. Crusaders collaborate with one another; the revitalized soil facilitates the return of pine; and pine stands ready to support the life of Matsutake. Importantly, the active disturbance practices of the Crusaders counterintuitively habituate volunteers into a deeper self-restraint: Crusaders learn to “mix with multispecies others without knowing where the world-in-process is going” (Tsing 2015, 264). Such practices both require and deepen attentional capacities. Tsing (2010) describes an afternoon disturbing the forest with the Crusaders that left everyone with a heightened capacity for landscape attention.

Animals and birds had settled in - and there was hope for mushrooms. Meanwhile, other projects were underway: a garden; a charcoal-making kiln; and a beetle-breeding mound for hobbyists. At the base of the hill was a place to eat, relax, and talk. At lunchtime, the workers sweating on the hill came down....Someone offered an amusing haiku about coming from America. Someone else showed off the ingeniously handcrafted crabs he had made. A landowner showed pictures of his property, which he hoped to revitalize using Crusader techniques. We lingered long together before going back to work. This was a revitalization not just of the hillside but of our senses (Tsing 2010, 200).

Notice that our discussion of undomesticated love began with—and now returns to—sensory receptivity. Notice, too, that landscape attention is both a precondition for, and a product of, undomesticated love. Landscape disturbance counterintuitively produces an ethos of self-restraint. The virtue of undomesticated love is the result of a reciprocal dance between dispositions (a sensory receptivity to indeterminacy), capacities (for an “open yet focused”

attention), and habits (the cultivation of mutualistic collaborations in the landscape).⁴³ The virtue of undomesticated love aims at flourishing, and it's a virtue that moves, mobilizing wandering practitioners into ethical environmental action. Taking this virtue seriously requires a transformation of quotidian eco-affections—and an embrace of environmental love without the promise of stability.

Why is undomesticated love genuinely an account of love, rather than merely the acceptance of indeterminacy, or a kind of serenity in the face of disorientation? Although acceptance is an important component of Tsing's ethic, hers is a love concept for three reasons: practitioners have a passionate affection for multispecies others, will the good of those others *as others*, and actively seek out mutually beneficial relationships. Accepting indeterminacy and welcoming disorientation does not require the practices of affectionate engagement that distinguish Tsing's love concept. Undomesticated love may even occasion felt obligations to multispecies collaborators—obligations that make love resilient in 'blasted' landscapes where pleasure cannot always be relied upon as a basis for ethics.⁴⁴

⁴³ One concern with Tsing's love account is that it's too grounded in the particularities of mushroom life. I think this challenge is ultimately unsuccessful: Tsing turns to mushrooms because they disclose with particular sharpness features that characterize landscapes more generally, such as ecological resistance to human control, multispecies collaboration as a ground of flourishing, etc. Thus, mushroom lovers are exemplars for environmental ethics, but learning from a moral exemplar does not require total mimicry.

⁴⁴ These remarks are in conversation with Maxwell's (2025) account of queer love, which I discuss in the following section. Queer love shares with undomesticated love an orientation to pleasure amid disorientation. However, I suggest that undomesticated love, in its mature form, facilitates multispecies mutualisms that can survive the displeasures of the capitalist ruins. In other words, my account offers an ethic that is ultimately more resilient than Maxwell's.

Is undomesticated love a radical departure from classic understandings of human love? At first glance, we should think not. This ethic contains erotic elements (a passionate yearning for ecological intimacy) as well as elements that resemble friendship love (a desire to live alongside multispecies others on a reciprocal, respectful basis).⁴⁵ Undomesticated love puts elements of classic love accounts on the move, in the muck of disorienting landscapes. That said, my account raises concerns around asymmetry: is it a problem for love if the more-than-human objects of our affection cannot love us back? I do not think asymmetry precludes love. After all, many love concepts in human relations do not require reciprocity: King's (2000) account of *agape*—an overflowing goodwill for all, seeking nothing in return—is defined precisely by its lack of reciprocity (121). Non-reciprocity does not make *agape* any less a love concept. The possibility of asymmetry also exists in 'traditional' dyadic love relationships between human beings: one lover will never know if their beloved loves them as they do (Cavell 2015). The possibility of asymmetry is a general characteristic of love; to speak of love without possible asymmetry is to speak of perfect unity, not love. Undomesticated love requires accepting beings with which I am entangled *as they are*—which is to say, being sufficiently self-restrained to accept their incapacity to love me back, as I nevertheless will and work toward their good.⁴⁶

But what of the *political* upshot of undomesticated love? Tsing may offer us a wonderful ethical ideal, but, as Sharon Krause (2023) rightly insists, “ethical injunctions have never been a reliable check on domination” (74). Tsing consciously disavows the institutional; for her, efforts to institutionalize the latent commons—spaces of undomesticated multispecies love—“do not

⁴⁵ For prominent political theoretical treatments of eros in human relations, see Lorde 1984 and Bloom 1993. For notable treatments of friendship love, see Nussbaum 1986; Derrida 1997; and Allen 2004.

⁴⁶ My argument here is indebted to Grušovnik's (2013) Cavellian account of environmental ethics.

capture the effervescence” of such niches (255). Krause proposes an ideal of “political respect for nature,” bringing together institutional checks on environmental domination with a “new public ethos” (2023, 74). Tsing’s lack of attention to the institutional in *Mushroom* is unfortunate because undomesticated love could contribute to a public ethos of environmental respect. Undomesticated love describes the affects and practices that could lead individuals to accept principled constraints on their use of power over nature, a crucial aspect of Krause’s ethos. It trains a sensitivity that could make respect resilient. That said, love is not a requirement for the respect of nature. Undomesticated love is a “warm stream” ethic that manifests in multispecies respect but does not preclude “cool stream” manifestations. Tsing, however, is particularly attentive to the ethical-affective *obstacles* (disgust, rage, repression) to political respect for nature. Even if we are unwilling to universalize undomesticated love, we can praise Tsing’s effort to temper disrespect for nature while modeling an attractive mode of multispecies life.

That said, the work of the later Tsing has been critiqued for an emphasis on multispecies ethics over radical politics. Lewis (2017) suggests that Tsing and her friend and colleague Donna Haraway pioneer an environmental tendency characterized by a “barely disavowed willingness to see whole cities and cultures wiped from the planet for the sake of a form of thriving among ‘companion species’ involving relatively few of *us*.” Ali (2020), discussing Tsing’s emphasis on the indomitable persistence of life in ‘blasted landscapes,’ wonders: “If death contains the seeds of life and life contains the seeds of death, then what need is there for justice?” (6). Perhaps Tsing’s mushroom writings orient us toward multispecies life amid capitalist ruins but offer little to those wishing to prevent capitalist processes from producing so very many ruins. Undomesticated love is an ethic that means to *move* us, but *movements* are hardly to be found in *Mushroom*. Instead, we get latent commons: elusive, undeveloped, fugitive “moments of

entanglement” that serve as an “ephemeral glimmer” of political possibility (2015, 255).⁴⁷ But if Tsing gives us a sketch of multispecies refuge, she disavows an account of multispecies insurgency. She leaves us with ephemeral glimmers, because, for her, “such glimmers are the political” (2015, 255).

But I think Tsing’s work can give us more than glimmers. In the next section, I work toward a capacious environmentalism that brings together the ethical capacities to form intimate collaborations in blasted landscapes with the political capacities to intervene in our political-ecological conjunctures amid seemingly hegemonic opposition. But for that, we will have to turn to an earlier Tsing.

A Politics That Moves: Discovering the Articulative Virtues

This section concerns the relationship between ecological love on the level of a landscape and political struggles aiming to transform large-scale institutions. I bring together an account of eco-political ethics with undomesticated love, suggesting that these twin ethics are mutually reinforcing. Toward this end, I reconstruct an account of ‘articulative virtue’ through a narrative treatment of Tsing’s 2005 ethnography, *Friction*. However, the upshot of the argument—that eco-love offers us an ethical preparation for political struggle—is mine, not Tsing’s. On my account, love is a school for environmental movements. My engagement with *Friction* leads me to narrate the development of virtues *at the level of the political collectivity*. In a similar vein, the final section of this chapter narrates recent anti-pipeline protests as an exemplary case of environmental love culminating in movement insurgency.

⁴⁷ In many ways, Tsing’s latent commons resemble a multispecies translation of Harney and Moten’s (2017) account of ‘undercommons,’ spaces of fugitive Black sociality in refuge from white politics.

By emphasizing environmental love's political-pedagogical potential, I distinguish my account from that of Lida Maxwell. In her 2025 text, *Rachel Carson and the Power of Queer Love*, Maxwell develops a powerful concept of multispecies 'queer love' that, at first glance, shares much in common with undomesticated love. Queer love responds with wonder—rather than the urge to control—at the mysteries of the natural world. Maxwell argues that Rachel Carson's relationship with Dorothy Freeman was, in fact, a multispecies achievement, inaugurated through a shared experience of a more-than-human world. What's more, this experience of queer love spurred Carson to engage in a confrontational 'politics of desire'—the desire to protect the multispecies world responsible for her love. Here, the experience of queer love moves us to action once we become aware of the forces standing in the way of multispecies pleasures. So too, I suggest, with undomesticated love. The multispecies collaborations that complete undomesticated love are profoundly fragile in the face of ecological destruction. If we take our eco-affections seriously, we ought to struggle against the capitalist practices and processes ravaging the planet.

But I want to say something more than Maxwell: that love makes us more agile eco-political actors. Undomesticated love means making collaborations amid indeterminacy. The articulative virtues deploy that capacity at a different scale: practitioners survey indeterminate political conjunctures, aiming to link social formations under the banner of a new subjectivity. Undomesticated love is a virtue that moves—it's a movement of the heart inaugurated through landscape wandering. The articulative virtues, too, are concerned with movement: they are exhibited through 'traveling activism,' aiming to cohere political passions into movements in defense of the planet.

Or so I will argue. But here we should introduce *Friction*, Tsing's (2005) study of the struggle for the Indonesian rainforest, which traces the rise of a fugitive environmentalism under the New Order regime of General Suharto. This formation emerged at a moment when explicit criticism of the regime was repressed. Thus, the language of environmentalism—viewed by the state as ‘nonpolitical’—became a venue for expressing democratic aspirations.

“Environmentalism cleared the way for other movements in the 1990s,” Tsing writes, “blossoming into human rights and labor concerns, as these became possible” (2005, 216). While not explicitly anti-capitalist, New Order environmentalism brought together diverse constituencies to challenge the state-led destruction of the Indonesian rainforest, opening space for more radical political tendencies after Suharto's fall. This formation emerged in the shadows of the state, but it also aimed to “reconfigure its possibilities,” ultimately contributing to a genuinely democratic opposition (Tsing 2005, 215). From the perspective of contemporary American politics, it is hard not to be inspired by the example of these brave activists struggling against forces of environmental destruction, social exclusion, and political repression. Here, I tell a story about this remarkable collectivity, extracting political-ethical wisdom from its cultivation of collective power in a disorienting political field.

Friction (2005) emerges from Tsing's fieldwork in the mountains of the Indonesian province of South Kalimantan. However, hers is not some ethnography of autonomous local cultural practices; one of her primary commitments is the view that the “local” cannot be understood absent the influence of the “universal” or “global”—and vice versa (2005, 8). The travel of universals takes place through diverse encounters: the “friction” involved in such encounters are central to contemporary global politics. “Friction,” on Tsing's account, describes the “productive rubbing together of varied historical trajectories or modes of practice”—

productive in the sense that out of frictional encounters, something new is produced. Friction is an amoral concept, but Tsing has a positive project in this text: she hopes to discover the “kinds of social justice [that] make sense in the twenty-first century” (2005, 2). I read the early Tsing as a theorist of political ethics, interested in the praiseworthy patterns of interaction that could enable struggle against environmental destruction amid cultural difference.

One of Tsing’s primary influences in *Friction* is Stuart Hall’s neo-Gramscian theory of articulation. Articulation refers to the arduous, conflictual process whereby new socio-political formations and subjects are brought into existence through discursive and material practices that link existing socio-political currents. Tsing glosses Hall’s theory as such: “New political subjects form...as pre-existing groups link and, through linking, enunciate new identities and interests” (2005, 77). Tsing demonstrates how a New Order project to open the Indonesian rainforest to capitalist development was constituted through partially hegemonic, overlapping articulations at different scales and different times.⁴⁸ These articulations, while cohering into a project of state-led capitalist development, enlist discourses associated with nationalism, legality, tradition, and Islam—discourses which are not transparently economic. The struggle against the development of the rainforest located gaps in those partial articulations, which, after Suharto’s fall, made space for economically radical (including Marxist) political currents (227).⁴⁹ Ultimately, Tsing’s

⁴⁸ Tsing refers here to the constitution of capitalist projects through the (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) acronym “aphids”: articulations among partially hegemonic imagined at different scales (Tsing 2005, 76).

⁴⁹ The Tsing of *Friction*, unlike Hall and Gramsci, cannot reasonably be called a Marxist. She does not assign the economic explanatory power in the last instance. Gramscian language around the ‘balance of class forces’ does not appear in *Friction*. That said, her account is not ultimately characterized by what Hall critiques as “the Charybdis of a pluralism which is so mesmerized by ‘everything’ that it cannot explain anything” (1980, 343). Her method in *Friction* not to dissolve global capitalism into an endless array of discrete regional ‘capitalisms’ — the force of

account of frictional articulation helps us explain why global capitalism appears in heterogeneous ways on the ground—and how non-economic discourses can ultimately break the hegemony of capitalist projects.

Clarke (2015) wisely suggests that Hall's theory of articulation generates a picture of political virtue, disclosing agilities that open political possibilities in an unfriendly conjuncture. Out of Tsing's study of Indonesian environmentalism emerges a promising set of articulative virtues—judgment, translation, collaboration, and travel—contributing to an eco-politics that mobilizes the passions. New Order environmentalists displayed the virtue of conjunctural judgment: the capacity to see “weaknesses, confusions, and gaps in business as usual,” and to introduce a “disturbance of everyday subservience” (Tsing 2005, 206). This articulative virtue rhymes with Machiavelli's conception of ‘virtu,’ which describes the ability to recognize gaps in relations of power and make a creative intervention in the political field that produces something new (Hall 1980). This is the Machiavelli that is translated through Gramsci and Hall into the notion of ‘conjunctural analysis’: the practice of “mapping the specificity of the present, of situating current developments historically, of looking out for political threats and opportunities” (Gilbert 2019, 5). In a departure from Machiavelli, Tsing's judgment is far from amoral. Rather, it is grounded in an ethical principle: the disturbance of everyday subservience. Tsing is

capitalism, for her, lies in its drive for totalization. “Capitalism only spreads,” she writes, “as producers, distributors, and consumers strive to universalize categories of capital, money, and commodity fetishism” (2005, 4). That said, Tsing wisely highlights the frictional material process through which these universal forms are enacted on the ground. For Tsing, “the cultural specificity of capitalist forms arises from the necessity of bringing capitalist universals into action through worldly encounters” (Ibid.). Ultimately, Tsing's method can help us make sense of the heterogeneity of capitalist development and anti-capitalist resistance.

interested in those emerging political forms that bring together rigorous analysis of the political terrain with “utopian visions” (Tsing 2005, 215). Grounding this capacity for conjunctural judgment is a particular kind of perception: a grounded, ‘here-and-now’ attention to one’s political landscape in its indeterminacy. Only by paying close attention—to “what connections are already being forged, what threads are being forgotten, and what apparently natural and normal alignments of things are coming apart”—could Hall, in his own manifestation of this virtue, “find the links and the connections that might be built upon to enable a conversation that moved” (Clarke 2015, 10).

Take the emphasis by first-generation Indonesian environmentalists on the legal system. Eco-populists might be wary of an approach to environmental protection that runs through lawsuits; the legal process, after all, is elite-driven and frequently circumscribes more unruly democratic efforts. But, in New Order Indonesia, “law seemed a site of possibility for expanding national consciousness” (Tsing 2005, 219). The Suharto regime placed an extraordinary emphasis on lawfulness, and lawyers tended to be strong supporters of the New Order. Legal discourses proliferated under Suharto as more explicitly political discourses were repressed. Lawsuits challenging environmental destruction provided an opening for more popular forms of assembly, such as courtroom vigils (Tsing 2005, 219). They also made space for capacious social justice critiques—around “crony capitalism, official corruption, and popular resistance” (220). While the limits to legal tactics were real, they demonstrated sophisticated capacities of conjunctural judgment: environmentalists discovered that what seemed like an element of New Order hegemony was, in fact, an opening for the disturbance of everyday subservience.

Practicing the articulative virtues generates a politics that *moves*, in two distinct senses. “To move is to travel, Tsing writes. “To be moved is to open one’s heart” (Tsing 2005, 213). The

work of articulation requires forms of “traveling activism” capable of working at diverse scales, speaking to plural audiences, and articulating “traveling” ideals in particular landscapes. The work of articulation also requires evoking the passions, stimulating potential allies to make “a moving personal commitment of love” (2005, 213). These two valences of movement supplement each other; after all, “there must be mobilization—the movement of the heart—for travel to remake the world” (2005, 214). Now a third sense emerges: the coordination of social formations, achieved through forms of traveling activism that mobilize the passions, into a political *movement* aiming to restructure large-scale institutions.

The ‘conceptual work’ involved in articulation fleshes out the relationship between travel and mobilization. For New Order environmentalists, traveling activism required arts of conceptual translation. Translation facilitates successful travel, both of persons and ideas. Translation also describes the work necessary to make linkages and alliances across scales. Indonesian environmentalists faced a particularly acute translational challenge around the word “Indigenous” (Tsing 2005, 224). In the 1990s, the global environmental movement was increasingly interested in the relationship between Indigenous rights and environmental protection. By framing campaigns as struggles by Indigenous people for their land, many Indonesian environmentalists believed they could translate their situation in a way that made sense to international actors. However, the global language of Indigenous environmentalism emerged out of struggles in the Amazon—a far different ethnic context than Indonesia. Indonesia is not a settler society, and one prominent translation of “Indigenous” (*pribumi*) functioned to exclude Indonesians of Chinese origin (Tsing 2005, 224). In the Indonesian context, Tsing writes, “racial categories are [often] irrelevant, but cultural categories are not” (2005, 225).

For that reason, environmentalists offered the translation *masyarakat adat*, which describes “traditional” societies still living according to “customary” law. This translation of “indigenous people” had a number of virtues. *Adat* (customary law) was described in core pieces of New Order legislation as the “basis” of Indonesian law; thus, the invocation of *adat* empowered rural peoples against the state (Tsing 2005, 225). Additionally, it gave a framework of belonging for rural peoples often described as “isolated tribes.” These peoples could now imagine themselves as a part of an “archipelago” of Indonesians living according to *adat* (226). This translation gave *adat* peoples a language—the language of tradition—that they could counterpose to the regime’s language of development. “For these new citizens of *adat*,” Tsing writes, “tradition formed a critical lens through which to de-naturalize coercive development and demand social justice” (2005, 226).

The invocation of *adat* represents an exemplary case of articulative virtue. It flowed from a deep attention to political landscapes at multiple scales, demonstrating an understanding of both “isolated” Indonesian tribes and the international NGO sector. It also disclosed a willingness to work with imperfect tools. The language of *adat* was routinely criticized within the Indonesian environmental movement (as ‘romantic,’ as exclusionary). Nonetheless, this translation facilitated a conversation that traveled in a disorienting and indeterminate political landscape, permitting linkages between “embattled rural peoples,” urban Indonesian environmentalists, and international allies (Tsing 2005, 226). Critically, *adat* evoked the passions, even if participants didn’t quite agree on the object of their passion. For the “new citizens of *adat*,” this language offered a vision of political belonging, united through shared traditional practices, and a basis for anti-regime struggle. International allies could feel passionate about their assistance to *adat* struggles, understanding them as part of a global effort

of indigenous peoples to defend their rights. This is a concept that moves: coalescing a commitment to an inspiring political vision and facilitating new alliances across scales.

Articulation is most successful when it plays hegemonic discourses against one another, thereby creating a kind of productive friction. In translating ‘indigenous’ as *adat*, New Order environmentalists enlisted nationalistic discourses against international environmental priorities—and vice versa. “Raising political expectations was made possible by finding a critical edge between transnational and national positions,” Tsing writes. “Activists found transnational standards to criticize national policies; they articulated national priorities to refocus transnational initiatives” (Tsing 2005, 218). ‘Transnational standards’ contain charismatic ideals: social justice, due process, sustainability, and freedom. These are ideals that inspire, that move. Indonesian environmentalism’s commitment to “revitalize” the nation while protecting its natural bounty was likewise charismatic (Tsing 2005, 215). Making friction between these ideals aimed to excite the passion of hope. Conceptual work is far from a dry academic exercise. When done right, it sparks the imagination, offering visions of justice, social change, and individual subjectivity that move plural social fractions to coalesce.

Mobilizing conceptual work also requires traveling activism. The early Tsing is clear: Any formation that disregards the charisma of universal ideals is unlikely to succeed. However, a successful appeal to environmental sustainability looks radically different in post-New Order Indonesia than in Sweden in 2025. Thus, articulative virtue means catalyzing the travel of universals, linking pre-existing groups into heterogeneous alliances. Travel can be literal, involving the delivery of a new message to far-flung places. It also means helping a given articulation land in a new political-ecological terrain. The terms through which universals and ideals are “to be enacted,” Tsing writes, “must be made accessible in new locales” (2005, 224). If

a political appeal is not made accessible, it won't travel—and it won't catalyze the linkages critical to the project of articulation.

Finally, traveling activism reciprocally reinforces other elements of the articulative virtues. When activists travel, they get better at paying attention to the surprising or disorienting aspects of their social landscape. They become more receptive to indeterminacy. The work of Romand Coles on traveling activism is helpful here. For Coles (2004), when activists visit new areas of their community, they grow comfortable building relationships that are “new, uncertain, challenging, [and] disruptive of the reigning order of things” (688). They begin to do democratic politics without the promise of stability. When activists embrace the indeterminacy of a social landscape, they can attend to perspectives they'd otherwise refuse to hear. “If our listening is poor,” Coles suggests, “perhaps we have not traveled receptively around our city” (688). The articulative virtues work together: when we travel, we pay better attention; when we pay attention, we're better at deploying articulations that move.

The articulative virtues and undomesticated love share much in common. Both concern movement. Both ethics are grounded in indeterminate landscapes. Practitioners of undomesticated love respond to indeterminacy with pleasure and an orientation towards mutualism; masters of the articulative virtues survey an indeterminate political landscape for possible collaborations across difference. These ethics also offer similar accounts of attention. In *Mushroom*, attention encompasses an “open yet focused” vision, a receptivity to landscape polyphony, and a sensitivity toward creating livable multispecies collaborations. This rhymes wonderfully with the attention required for successful political articulation: a grounded yet mobile attention, wandering between scales of analysis, foraging for submerged possibilities (see Clarke 2015, 10). Undomesticated love is an ethic both wandering and passionate; the

articulative virtues require traveling forms of activism oriented toward inspiring “a moving personal commitment of love,” one which culminates in the creation of a political movement aiming to reshape the polity (Tsing 2005, 215).

Undomesticated love and the articulative virtues are twin. But I want to do more than observe a similarity between these ethics—I want to insist on a mutualism. When our local environmental affections are informed by undomesticated love, we receive an education that is more than ecological. This is an education that primes us for political action—for the practice of the articulative virtues. Undomesticated love contains a passionate desire to maintain relations of mutual flourishing; it also contains the capacity to see our landscapes clearly. Seeing our landscapes clearly means recognizing the practices threatening multispecies collaborations. Our desire to enter into environmental collaborations may transform into a desire to enter politics. Now engaging in political struggle, we have reason to hope that undomesticated love has prepared us well. After all, struggle involves the formation of linkages amid indeterminacy, and practitioners of undomesticated love already know how to do that. Engaging in practices of traveling activism, undomesticated lovers may find that they’re already rather practiced at wandering.

Indeed, the articulative virtues, deployed on behalf of environmental justice, seek a world safe for undomesticated love. Thinking with but beyond Tsing, we can travel from local eco-affections into political struggle—and back again.

Two Parables of Tsingian Environmentalism

But this may seem rather theoretical, a departure from my grounded, narrative approach to ethical and political inquiry. By way of conclusion, I discuss how the dance between these

ethics might unfold on the ground. I want to narrate two parables of undomesticated love and articulative virtue. These are optimistic stories of an environmentalism of love that combines insurgent politics with a sensitive landscape-based practice. In the first narrative—drawn from Tsing herself—practitioners of undomesticated love appear primed to engage in the work of articulation. In the second, I narrate a powerful recent political articulation—the insistence by anti-Dakota Access Pipeline protesters that Water Is Life (Mni Wiconi)—as grounded in undomesticated love.

In our first parable, we return to the Matsutake Crusaders, the group of mushroom lovers who engage in conscious practices of landscape disturbance in order to “revitalize the forest” (Tsing 2015, 258). These individuals model local forms of ecological affection. The Crusaders love Matsutake, and they love the forest. As we have seen, they exhibit the virtue of undomesticated love in its mature form, engaging in ecologically grounded practices aimed at stimulating multispecies collaborations. But that’s not all. To my eyes, they appear primed to acquire the articulative virtues. Under the umbrella of the Matsutake Crusaders, they have linked individuals and communities with dramatically different social backgrounds. The organizing work behind the Crusaders brings together urban scientists with rural farmers, linking modern agricultural techniques with “vernacular knowledge” (263). In other words, this organizing work involves alliance-building translational practices that would be familiar to Indonesian environmentalists, with their well-developed sense of the articulative virtues.

Working alongside one another are retirees, students, housewives, scientists, farmers, and “salaried employees willing to give up free weekends” (Tsing 2015, 259). Plural individuals such as these do not simply appear together on the hillside—they must travel, across geographic space and social difference. Crusader collaborations prefigure the articulative practices of traveling

activism. Through this travel, volunteers remake “persons as well as landscapes” (263). In their forest work, Crusaders hope to stimulate a collaboration with Matsutake while understanding that they cannot force one into existence. The work of articulation is similar: an articulation is an invitation to solidarity and struggle—but no articulation can coerce a movement into cohering. Finally, the name Matsutake Crusaders is itself an articulation, a name under which individuals can become a group, possessing a new Crusader subjectivity. Their crusade is, in the final analysis, against alienation and anomie. Their struggle is nothing less than an insurgent effort to “recover the lost sociality of community life” against overwhelming obstacles (262). This insurgency is more social than political—but if I were looking for a comrade in an environmental struggle, I might look for a Crusader.

In our second parable, we look beyond Tsing to the protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline (often described as the #NoDAPL movement), one of the most inspiring formations in recent Indigenous eco-politics. This movement coalesced thousands of protesters into water protection camps, including representatives from hundreds of tribes (Cuevas et al.). But this struggle began with love: love of a particular people (the Oceti Sakowin, or Sioux) for a particular place (the Mni Sose, or Missouri River). “Our water is our single last property that we have for our people,” declared Standing Rock Sioux councilmember, “Water is life. Mni Wiconi” (Estes, 1). But, for the people of the Oceti Sakowin, loving the river is far more than the passive enjoyment of some lovely natural feature. Mni Wiconi describes a love that travels beyond the Mni Sose, spurring action in defense of clean water *everywhere*, multispecies flourishing *everywhere*. Daniel Grasshopper, a Lower Sioux #NoDAPL protester, explains:

We’re Native Americans, and we’re not doing it just for us. We’re doing it for all people. For the four legged. For the winged. For all things that need water. And we all do. Water is life for everybody ... Mni Wiconi, we say, which means, ‘water is life’ (Project 562).

This is the assertion of something like undomesticated love: a practice rooted in a particular love but culminating in forms of collective action that travel. Mni Wiconi became a central *articulation* coalescing diverse actors into the #NoDAPL movement (Johnson and Kraft 2018). Mni Wiconi describes a love ethic that travels; Mni Wiconi too represents an articulation oriented toward movement. Protesters, speakers of hundreds of different languages, chanted a Lakota phrase, engaging in risky forms of direct action in defense of a river with which many had little familiarity. Mni Wiconi is a successful slogan because it enables the work of translation: a critical articulative virtue. It grounds protesters in an ethico-spiritual tradition while allowing them to imagine their own sustaining water features—as well as all water on the globe—as being at stake in the #NoDAPL movement. As Johnson and Kraft write:

The “mni wiconi — water is life/sacred water” formula combines concreteness (this river) and up-scaled universality (water in general), with an ultimate and existential dimension that is — again — obvious, immediate, and universally comprehensible (525).

In other words, what begins in love for the Mni Sose ends in a diverse movement aspiring to the defense of life on earth. Indeed, although protesters were eventually forced to clear the Sacred Stone Camp, many #NoDAPL participants—including online supporters—continued to engage in forms of traveling activism, collaborating as “highly mobile warriors” in opposition to extractive projects around the globe (517). A politics of articulation, translation, and travel flows from a love ethic that puts us on the move.

Ultimately, both parables demonstrate the dialectical relationship between undomesticated love and the articulative virtues. Love on the level of the landscape can move us to insurgent action against the forces destroying our environments. Insurgent political action inspired by eco-love enlists the articulative virtues—virtues which are prefigured in the practices of undomesticated love. The vision of ecological flourishing that emerges out of this discussion

is rooted in collective action, in mutualism, in politics. This is a politics articulating a vision beyond alienation and ruination—a politics offering the hope of messy, imperfect love as a mode of life.

CONCLUSION AN ECO-SOCIALIST CIVIC VIRTUE

Across the chapters, we've narrated the experience of exemplary figures reaching toward radical political action in the face of immobilization. The work of narration has generated a bounty of eco-political virtues: socialist self-discipline, Luxemburgian sympathy, devotion, vision, love, articulative intelligence, among others. These virtues do practical work in the world, enabling eco-socialist agitation in unfriendly circumstances. They also do psychic work, bringing passion for emancipatory struggle together with resilience in failure's wake. Alongside particular virtues, we've constructed a virtue *framework* appropriate to a radical environmental politics. An eco-socialist civic virtue, we've discovered, emerges through hybrid traditions. Its practitioners attach themselves to transnational anti-capitalist struggles, aiming to re-found the human-nature relationship on a democratic basis. This is an ethic that refuses to cloak the subordination of excluded others in the language of virtue. It embraces a chastened account of virtue's promise under oppressive conditions. Yet despite its burdened character, an eco-socialist civic virtue is oriented toward the flourishing of human life alongside the flourishing of more-than-human ecologies. Such flourishing represents a core aspirational horizon—the practical demands of which remain open to contestation—whose appeal may lessen the burdens of political action in an unjust social order.

Charismatic images of ethical formation have followed my treatment of the virtues. Think of Rosa Luxemburg lying in a cold, dark cell, hearing the crunch underneath a guard's boot as a beautiful, small song of life. Or Zora, in a church far from home, hearing in the words of a preacher a call to serve her people. Or the Indonesian environmentalists stitching together international alliances around the language of *adat*. My hope is that these images stick, serving as a resource for ethical reflection amid contemporary eco-political dilemmas. Images, of course,

structure the imagination. Exemplars ground our ethical development. When we engage in ethical reflection, we frequently call to mind admirable models of prior action; models of action structure our conception of the possible and the praiseworthy. This is not to say that contemporary environmental actors ought to be rigidly constrained by the images I've offered. Action without exemplars is impossible. But attempting to perfectly mirror those who came before us is to abandon our capacity for judgment. Indeed, the work of mature ethical judgment consists of reinterpreting exemplary models for novel circumstances. What does it mean to be a Mensch in the fight against Trump's evisceration of the environmental state? What visionary capacities are required to grasp atmospheric changes that are invisible to the human eye? In a democratic eco-politics, these questions are subject to free judgment, borne of self-reflection and communal deliberation alike.

The stories I've told in this dissertation have happy endings. Its protagonists face trials but triumph over them, furnishing virtues that might be of use to the rest of us. These narratives could be accused of being structurally romantic, promising the ultimate victory of virtue and sustainability over the forces destroying the planet. No such victory is promised, of course — it must be won. Brandon Terry (2025) has recently criticized romantic narrations of the civil rights movement for emphasizing the inevitability of national reconciliation, ultimately risking the foreclosure of contentious politics entirely (42). His preference is for tragic narrations of this exemplary moment in American history, emphasizing the irreducibly contingent and conflictual character of human action. But Terry's is a case where exemplary images of political-ethical overcoming (Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial, John Lewis on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, Rosa Parks on a Montgomery bus) have become so authoritative, so core to the structure of the American political imaginary, that they inhibit the refinement of our judgment.

The same diagnosis simply cannot be offered concerning 21st-century environmental politics, where exemplars of successful action are in desperately short supply. In contemporary environmentalism, initiative and judgment are inhibited not because we are immobilized by the legacies of secular saints, but because we have vanishingly few orienting images of praiseworthy environmental transformation in the first place. Is there a single environmental radical who needs reminding of the tragic and conflictual nature of human action? Need we be reminded that we might fail? If I have offered too rosy a narration of my figures, it is for a purpose: to contribute to the construction of a tradition of eco-political action, furnishing models of ethical formation to serve as thought partners for those wrestling with contemporary dilemmas. Such a tradition serves not to foreclose judgment or promise ultimate victory; rather, it represents a starting point for ongoing reflection and inquiry.

But this dissertation has promised more than a set of exemplars or the beginnings of a constructed tradition of action. I have promised to cohere an *ethic*, an eco-socialist civic virtue. An ethic is a mode of action and conduct, a way of relating to the world and one's fellows. It's a system of attachments, practices, and affects—that is, virtues—that enable individuals to pursue a particular life project. To say that someone possesses civic virtue of a neo-Roman character is to describe them as living according to a political ethic committed to the preservation of republican liberty. Such an ethic brings together multiple virtues that cohere into a mode of living. An ethic is not an ethical rulebook or metaphysical doctrine—it's a principled style of conduct that emerges out of a history of inquiry and practice.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Take, for example, Weber's (2002) account of the 'Protestant ethic.' This is an ethic informed by theological claims—but theological claims alone cannot furnish a mode of conduct. Rather, as Weber shows, the Protestant

What might we hope for from a distinctly *political* ethic? Any political ethic, I suggest here, should offer resources to mobilize action, preserve agency, and enable judgment. Mobilizing resources spur action; they move individuals from stuckness into commitment. Preservative resources have a therapeutic function, enabling an agent to sustain political commitment in the wake of failure. Resources of judgment guide actors in making decisions about the practical demands of their political project in a given conjuncture.⁵¹

These themes, of course, have been with us all along. Political formation, throughout the chapters, has been about learning how to (1) initiate action from a state of immobilization, (2) endure in one's commitment amid setbacks, and (3) make intelligent practical judgments. All the narratives populating this dissertation bear on these questions. Indeed, with respect to mobilization, preservation, and action, our figures can be thought of as offering variations on three themes.

Therefore, I conclude with three brief essays discussing the commitments of an eco-socialist civic virtue with respect to mobilization, preservation, and judgment. This effort

ethic contains multiple interlocking virtues and ethical orientations, informed by a tradition of ethico-theological inquiry into the practical demands occasioned by a particular flavor of Protestant theology.

⁵¹ This way of systematizing the requirements of a political ethic is not without precedent. Rather, I suggest, the tripartite distinction between mobilization, preservation, and judgment roughly maps onto the functions of the political ethic Weber famously develops in 'Politics As a Vocation.' "One can say that three pre-eminent qualities are decisive for the Politician," Weber (1946) writes, "passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion" (36). Passion, in Weber's telling, is that which motivates a politician to act on behalf of a cause. It is mobilizing. An ethic of responsibility, in turn, guides political actors in making intelligent judgments about the likely effects of one's actions. A sense of proportion preserves the politician against zealotry or inner turmoil. In other words, a sense of proportion has a metabolic function, enabling the politician to direct one's passion in a responsible manner.

represents the culmination of my narrative approach to the history of political thought. In each chapter, I furnished narratives of political character formation, from which I constructed ethical resources for contemporary environmental politics. The following essays aim to cohere these insights, offering a positive account of eco-socialist political ethics, in conversation with our community of exemplars.

Mobilization

An eco-socialist civic virtue is mobilizing. Its practitioners model a capacity to overcome dispositional obstacles to eco-political action, especially despair, disorientation, and disempowerment. At the same time, they model a capacity to motivate others to undertake demanding forms of radical political commitment. An eco-socialist civic virtue does its mobilizing work through the transformation of existing attachments. Its materials are the affections and commitments individuals already have. Think, for example, of Zora's mature political devotion, rooted in an inchoate racial piety. Before possessing anything like a radical political consciousness, Zora knew she loved Black people. Or consider the fidelity of ordinary Standing Rock Sioux to the Missouri River. For an eco-socialist civic virtue, these attachments are the starting point for mobilization. After all, as we have learned with Tsing, mobilization requires the movement of the heart; the passions are mobilization's ground. Zora develops a mature commitment to Black uplift as she allows her racial piety to be transformed by a deepening understanding of environmental racism. Standing Rock Sioux devote themselves to the struggle against capitalist extraction by reflecting on what it means to be obligated to steward Mni Sose. For an eco-socialist civic virtue, even the most quotidian environmental love can serve

as a weapon against despair. An eco-socialist civic virtue is motivated by a belief that our most seemingly inconsequential loves might be a seed of radical political commitment.

Of course, we often need help to grasp the radical demands occasioned by our quotidian environmental attachments. For that reason, an eco-socialist civic virtue embraces a rhetorical practice that motivates by furnishing charismatic images. It is often through the invocation of charismatic images — images that evoke existing passions — that we are moved to political struggle. By offering an image of *adat* peoples united in defense of the rainforest, Indonesian environmentalists mobilized rural villagers to join their existing attachments (to their community, to their ancestors) with a transnational fight against capitalist development. Zora was only able to mobilize support for her farm commune through the assistance of an elder capable of describing Zora's scheme using the imagery of the Black church. Leaders of eco-socialist struggles must model such rhetorical excellence, deploying charismatic images that articulate the relationship between existing passions and the demands of environmental emancipation.

An eco-socialist civic virtue insists that one take one's life seriously. Our conduct and commitments are no frivolous matter, an eco-socialist rhetorician will insist. In the face of mammoth ecological threats, we should lead lives that future generations might respect. We see elements of this insistence in Rosa Luxemburg's invocation of the socialist civic virtues, which proffer remarkably high standards for the ethical conduct of working people. In a disempowered dispositional environment, such an insistence can be mobilizing, reminding audiences of their capacity for ethico-political enlargement. Zora, too, models such praiseworthy seriousness in her quest for a 'Way,' a fundamental ethical commitment, one worthy of her dignity, that might give

her life a unified structure. Practitioners of an eco-socialist civic virtue are those who have devoted themselves to a ‘Way.’

This is an ethic that celebrates practices of traveling activism alongside practices of return. Mobilization occurs when activists travel across political landscapes, linking diverse constituencies under the banner of a charismatic articulation. But mobilization also occurs when activists return to the people, places, and problems they know best, enlisting local knowledges against those seeking to despoil familiar surrounds. Practitioners of an eco-socialist civic virtue ultimately embrace a mutualism between traveling practices and return practices. Only by rooting ourselves in the familiar can we sympathetically grasp the commitments of those we encounter in travel; only by leaving home can we prevent our local commitments from ossifying into chauvinism.

Preservation

An eco-socialist civic virtue hopes to enable forms of political commitment that endure across time. For that reason, practitioners of this ethic model a self-preservationist instinct: they are concerned to preserve their own status as environmental radicals. They cultivate mental habits to protect against burnout, disillusionment, and corruption. The spiritual exercises described in Rosa Luxemburg’s prison letters are a powerful case of such cultivation. Taking inspiration from Luxemburg, an eco-socialist civic virtue enables political actors to recognize limits to their power, to modulate their sense of efficacy in dark moments. Luxemburg’s prison serenity was won, in part, by accepting that she had been taken off the battlefield of history—and that, if she wanted to survive as a radical, she must react to her confinement with a smile. An eco-socialist civic virtue celebrates laughter and humor as exemplary tools for chastening one’s

own sense of historical importance. This is an ethic that insists we take ourselves seriously while nonetheless recognizing that we are not gods. Political actors with inflated senses of efficacy risk crippling despair in moments of failure; humor wards against such deadly temptations.

The preservative function of an eco-socialist civic virtue is metabolic. Here, excellence lies in the capacity to transform affects that may be overwhelming into affects that can enable renewed political commitment. Zora, for example, cultivates a capacity to let rage flow through her, to let agony run its course, so that she can return to her work in deadly earnestness. Luxemburg, too, works to redirect her hot revolutionary passions into cooler passions attached to rigorous political analysis. The Mensch Ethic is ultimately a complex metabolic system; Luxemburg achieves serenity in a prison cell by refashioning psychic materials born of the barricades. Political endurance, ultimately, is a product of rich self-knowledge, psychic experimentation, and an abiding radical commitment.

Alongside humor, an orientation toward environmental delight serves a crucial preservative function for an eco-socialist civic virtue. Throughout the dissertation, my figures experience moments of joy that release the tensions of disillusionment and fear. Take, for example, Tsing's beautiful description of mushroom-foraging as a balm to disorientation:

Mushrooms pull me back into my senses, not just—like flowers—through their riotous colors and smells but because they pop up unexpectedly, reminding me of the good fortune of just happening to be there. Then I know that there are still pleasures amidst the terrors of indeterminacy (2015, 1).

An eco-socialist civic virtue orients political radicals to cultivate abiding attachments to the non-human world. Only through deep familiarity with beloved landscapes can such niches truly surprise us, opening us up to the delights of indeterminacy. As Luxemburg demonstrates, the achievement of sympathetic relationships with non-human creatures serves both a

preservative and prefigurative function. Such relationships offer stability amid political turbulence; they also model a way of relating to the natural world grounded in attention and care.

Finally, practitioners of an eco-socialist civic virtue resist the temptation to accommodate oneself to oppressive power structures. *Quest*, I think, offers a particularly valuable ethical education on the relationship between radical commitment and the risk of ‘worldly’ corruption. Zora’s youthful stance of self-withholding is an effort to avoid corruption; however, this avoidance is so rigid that Zora becomes immobilized, locked in a world of dreams. Caroline Wynn and Bles both model forms of political action that have been corrupted by worldly influences. Wynn chastens her political aspirations to accommodate negative white appraisals of Black people, while Bles cultivates a stance of propriety meant to impress white and Black elites alike. In her political formation, Zora ultimately overcomes her youthful world-rejection, while nonetheless preserving her capacity to withstand corruption. What she comes to model is what an eco-socialist civic virtue commends: a worldly resistance to oppressive power, rejecting accommodation while committing herself, again and again to the fight.

Judgment

Judgment, for an eco-socialist civic virtue, is far more than an academic exercise. Strategic decisions only emerge against the background of orienting ethico-political commitments. All of the figures in this dissertation have understood judgment to be an ethically thick and essentially passionate activity. Luxemburg’s commitment to historical understanding from prison was leavened by her abiding passion for revolutionary emancipation—the same passion that led her to the barricades upon her release. The work of intelligent political articulation, in the work of Anna Tsing, is grounded in the disturbance of everyday subservience.

The articulative virtues exist precisely at the nexus between judgment and struggle. So too with Zora's mature visionary capacity, a virtue whose intellectual aspects are only completed once Zora surveys her landscape with love. The essential attachments of an eco-socialist civic virtue — to democracy, to institutional transformation, to the flourishing of life — represent an aspirational horizon against which day-to-day practical considerations become legible.

An eco-socialist civic virtue also insists that intellectual work—the work of historical and political understanding—is good for us and our flourishing. Call to mind Luxemburg's (2013, 408-11) description of her time writing *The Accumulation of Capital* ("I was living as though in euphoria...I saw and heard nothing else"), emphasizing the erotic quality of intellectual life. Zora's intellectual practice, too, emerges from *eros*: a belief that there is more going on in the world behind ordinary, untrained perception, and an overriding desire to grasp that *more*. Underneath that overriding desire is what Odell (2024) describes, speaking about Luxemburg, as an 'amor mundi': "a never-ending love affair with complexity and the desire to do justice to it." Ultimately, the capacity for judgment is among the exemplary human capacities. An eco-socialist civic virtue suggests that the praiseworthy navigation of a grubby world of tactics and strategy might carry its own spirituality. Radical political judgment operates on a tragic terrain, featuring conflict, contingency, and the permanent risk of loss. But the experience of judgment will not always be a vale of tears.

Notwithstanding this ethic's celebration of a specifically human judging capacity, such judgment must be attentive to the world-making activities of the more-than-human. Our judgment will be faulty if we fail to recognize that life on earth is the product of joint action, emerging from efforts of non-human entities to live and flourish. The success of the farm commune relies on the realization that her efforts will be unsuccessful absent the cooperation of

‘Brer Rabbit’ and his fellows. An eco-socialist civic judgment is attentive to the ways in which non-human labor can be pressed into exploitative human projects; Luxemburg’s buffalo letter models just this kind of attention to processes of environmental domination. But an eco-socialist civic virtue holds out hope that human labor might enlist the world-making capacities of the non-human on a basis of respect (think here, for example, of the work of the Matsutake Crusaders to stimulate a ‘latent commons’). The difficult work of distinguishing oppressive from non-oppressive enlistments of non-human activity is a crucial responsibility of eco-socialist political judgment.

Political judgment, on my account, relies on the imagination, the capacity to see what might be otherwise in a given conjuncture. Political imagination, of course, can resemble mere fancifulness if not rooted in a commitment to grasp one’s situation. But, as Zora shows us, understanding without imagination is dead. Zora’s vision is an exemplary virtue precisely because it combines her capacity for dreaming with her erotic drive to make sense of her environment. Ultimately, judgment, for an eco-socialist civic virtue, involves pressing one’s capacity for imagination in the practical service of those we love.

We began this dissertation with imagination, and with imagination we will end. This project has been an effort to rekindle the imagination in a disempowered eco-political moment. We turned to stories of ethical formation because such stories can guide the experience of political learning, spurring us to reimagine what’s possible for our politics and ourselves. We’ve also encountered powerful images that prompt us to join a commitment to eco-political struggle

with a commitment to the flourishing of life. I want to conclude with one final image, especially appropriate to our own war-torn moment. In the final weeks of her life, released from her cell and back on the barricades, Rosa Luxemburg insisted that agitation against the forces of imperialism and war is, ultimately, a struggle for the flourishing of all organic life. An eco-socialist civic virtue joins her in proclaiming that the socialist project, the project of human emancipation

is in a position to complete the great work of permanent peace, to heal the thousand wounds from which humanity is bleeding, to transform the plains of Europe, trampled down by the passage of the apocryphal horseman of war, into blossoming gardens (Luxemburg et al. 2008 [1918]).

Let it be so.

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