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Kate Rigby

Feathering the Multispecies Nest: Green Cities, Convivial Spaces

How might we reimagine the green city from an interdisciplinary environmental humanities perspective? As a site of more-than-human flourishing and a context for the enactment of bio-inclusive forms of ecological citizenship? With ever more species becoming displaced by the calamitous impacts of anthropogenic global warming, along with other drivers of habitat destruction, do our green cities not also need to become places of welcome to other-than-human, as well as human, refugees? To reconceive the green city as a site of more-than-human conviviality and hospitality, we would need to effect a cultural shift to resituate humankind ecologically, while resituating otherkind (plants, animals, and fungi, but potentially also rivers, wetlands, and woods, for example) ethically. To do this would be to break through the walls of human self-enclosure by enacting what Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood has termed cultural practices of “deep sustainability” (2006, 2009).

Cities have historically been conceptualized as places set apart from rural and wild spaces, often demarcated by defensive walls: these were human-constructed sites for the enactment of exclusively human dramas; or at least, dramas in which humans claim all the lead roles (Williams 1985). “O Ur-shanabi,” exclaims the Sumerian King Gilgamesh to his boatman in one of the world’s oldest surviving documents of urban civilization, “climb Uruk’s wall and walk back and forth!/ Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!/ Were its bricks not fired in an oven?/ Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?” (George 2003, 99).

Despite such lines of demarcation, both conceptual and physical, cities have always been, to a greater or lesser extent, multispecies locales. The legendary Sumerian city of Uruk, which was at its peak around 2,900 BCE, is also hailed in *Gilgamesh* as “Uruk-the-Sheepfold,” presumably alluding to the presence of livestock within the city walls. Gilgamesh also boasts that these walls enclosed not only the city proper and the temple of Ishtar, but also a clay pit and a date grove, the latter doubtless home to a seasonally shifting collective of birds and insects.

An ecotopian village illustration from a calendar produced by the Save the Ridge group, protesting the destruction of bushland in Canberra, Australia, to create a new highway around 2005. Contributions by Hunderwasser, Tarquin & Graham King. Image courtesy of the Save the Ridge Committee.



Gilgamesh, who had made his fame and fortune by clear felling a far-flung forested mountain and defeating its guardian deity, Humbaba, wastes no words on urban wildlife, however. Nor does he mention the rodents that, in the historical world beyond the text, had come with the storage of grain in agrarian settlements; the cats that followed, eventually making themselves our familiars; nor the dogs that some city dwellers have also kept as coworkers and/or companions since ancient times. This silence is instructive: cities might team with more-than-human biota, including, of course, bacteria, protists, fungi and such, the genomes of which constitute some 90 percent of the DNA that humans carry about on and in their bodies, as Donna Haraway (2007, 3) reminds us. But nonhumans are generally relegated to the background, tolerated only on human terms and in their proper places (Rose and Van Dooren 2012, 16).

The separation of the *polis*—constituted by humans *qua* citizens—from the *bios*—the diverse collectivity of living beings—was arguably exacerbated with the rise of industrial modernity. This separation occurred most tangibly through the exclusion of livestock, the increasing density of the human population, and their growing physical distance from the countryside. But it also happened more subtly through the deepen-

ing of nature-culture dualism, as evidenced in the separation of the “natural” from the “human” sciences in the institutionalization of the modern disciplines of knowledge during the nineteenth century (Serres 1995, 31–32). It was nonetheless precisely during the early period of fossil-fueled industrialization, beginning in Britain in the late eighteenth century, that modern animal welfare and animal rights theories, policies, and practices began to gain ground (Thomas 1983). Many modern cities certainly made provision for those nonhumans that its human denizens have deemed desirable, notably in zoos, parks, gardens, and in the case of particularly pampered pets, in living rooms, and even human beds.

Yet the prevailing anthropocentrism of modern urban society—which engenders a perilous disregard for our biospheric dependencies, entanglements, and responsibilities—in conjunction with unecological technologies and exploitative political economies, has contributed to forms of urban (mal)development that are damaging to many aspects of the *bios*, including vulnerable human bodies. The persistence of this anthropocentric social imaginary of the city can be seen in the eleventh of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (adopted 2015). This goal envisages a future that “includes cities of opportunities *for all*, with access to basic services, energy, housing, transportation and more” (UN, n.d.), whereby “all” evidently excludes all nonhumans (albeit with the tacit exception of those plants and animals that might be seen to contribute to human well-being).

In her paper on the “sustainability gap” (see Fischer et al. 2007), Plumwood differentiated her depth model of sustainability from conventional constructions of both “deep ecology,” with its prioritization of “wilderness” preservation on the one hand, and “shallow ecology,” with its privileging of exclusively human interests on the other. Instead, she proposes a mixed framework that reveals how “human-centredness can have severe costs for humans as well as non-humans” (2009, 116). By “human-centredness” or “anthropocentrism,” Plumwood is referring to “a complex syndrome which includes the hyper-separation of humans as a special species and the reduction of non-humans to their usefulness to humans, or instrumentalism” (116). It is a syndrome, moreover, in which—as she demonstrated previously in her landmark book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993)—human domination of nature has historically been entangled with various forms of social inequity (notably along lines of gender, race, and class). Rejecting what she calls the “pernicious false choice” of the deep/shallow divide, which was first theorized by Arne

Naess (1973), Plumwood argues that human-centeredness also engenders a hazardous “failure to understand our embeddedness in and dependency on nature [and] distorts our perceptions and enframings in ways that make us insensitive to limits, dependencies and interconnections of a non-human kind” (2009, 116).



Insect hotel in the Parc de la Tête d'Or, Lyon, France. Photo by Daderot [public domain], from Wikimedia Commons.

Accordingly, the “cultural work of deep sustainability” proceeds from the critique of conceptual frameworks and social systems that occlude both the agency and interests of nonhuman others, and the ecological services upon which human social and economic sustainability remain dependent. In “Nature in the Active Voice,” Plumwood goes on to identify certain forms of writing that might advance this work by providing a space for what she calls an “animating sensibility and vocabulary” (2009, 126), engaging readers imaginatively with other-than-human creative agencies, communicative capacities, and ethical considerability. Here, though, I want to consider how such work might be undertaken beyond the page, so to speak, on the ground, in urban spaces, in the creation of what environmental geographer Steve Hinchliffe (2007, 124–49) has termed “living cities,” open to multiple more-than-human presences, as distinct from human-dominated models of urban sustainability.

This line of inquiry leads onto the fertile terrain of a new field of investigation called multispecies ethnography. As Kirksey and Helmreich explain, “[M]ultispecies ethnography

centers on how a multitude of organisms' livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces . . . multispecies ethnographers are studying contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down, where encounters between *Homo sapiens* and other beings generate mutual ecologies and coproduced niches" (2010, 545–6). In their wonderful exploration of the entangled life stories of humans, flying foxes, and penguins in Sydney, Deborah Bird Rose and Thom Van Dooren reimagine the city as a locus of multispecies conviviality, understood as a "kind of being together that is not reducible to shared identities," but rather "a practice of temporary identification with others in a shared place" (Fincher and Iveson 2015, quoted in Rose and Van Dooren 2012, 17). Mindful of the distinct semiospheres—or *Umwelten*, as Jakob von Uexküll (2010) termed them—inhabited by different species, Rose and Van Dooren stress that "Identification,' in contrast to 'identity,' does not require that we share an essence or even a project, but simply that we are attentive to another's presence, to their way of being in a place." They go on to argue that "[i]n the context of urban planning, conviviality cannot be engineered but it can be both accommodated and planned for. Conviviality thus requires that we make an effort toward inclusiveness, that we endeavor wherever possible to make room for that other in our activities in shared places" (2012, 17).

In their article, Rose and Van Dooren explore what this might mean in the case of the penguins and flying foxes who have determined to nest and roost (respectively) in Sydney's seaside suburb of Manly and in the city's central Botanical Gardens. While they do not offer any specific policy advice here, the multispecies stories they tell both invite and enable more bio-inclusive practices of urban sustainability that respect the interests and agency of nonhuman, as well as human, residents: in this case, a small colony of little penguins (*Eudyptula minor*), who have continued to return to their ancestral breeding site in Sydney's increasingly suburban Manly Cove; and a very large colony of endangered grey-headed flying foxes (*Pteropus poliocephalus*), seeking to make a new home for themselves in the city's parks and gardens, as their bushland habitat has been progressively diminished.

Such ethically, ethologically, ecologically, and anthropologically informed explorations of the particular ways in which humans are, and have always been, becoming-with other species arises in the shadow of mass extinction on an increasingly anthropogenic planet (Rose and Van Dooren 2011): one in which biodiversity conservation cannot be left to so-called "nature reserves" or designated "wilderness areas," but

needs to be undertaken not only on farmland, but also in cities—wherever human lives and livelihoods are entangled with, and especially where they threaten, the lives and livelihoods of otherkind. In this context, the cultural work of deep sustainability in the creation of the green cities of the future needs to extend beyond conviviality to encompass concerted practices of bio-inclusive hospitality.

One example of this is the Chicago-based “Migration and Me” program. An initiative of the “Faith in Place” organization,¹ which seeks to inspire “religious people of diverse faiths to care for the Earth through education, connection, and advocacy,” this project is designed to link socioeconomically disadvantaged African-American and Latino faith communities with local conservation initiatives. Veronica Kyle, Chicago Congregational Outreach Director for Faith in Place, realized that shared experiences of dislocation and migration could provide the key to engaging these communities with the predicament of other creatures on the move, since “human beings, monarch butterflies, migratory birds, and other migrating species all seek welcoming places to eat, rest, and live along the migration journey and at the destination.”² She therefore created a space for sharing stories of migration in conjunction with learning about the struggles of other species, inspiring the participation of hundreds of city dwellers, most of whom carried their own histories of dislocation and marginalization, in the creation and restoration of habitat for butterflies and other insects. Participating in this program has also fostered new forms of community across ethnic and religious divides, and brought physical benefits and spiritual nourishment to many of those involved, as well as providing an urban refuge for nonhuman residents or visitors hard pressed by adverse environmental changes arising from industrial farming, land clearing, and climate change. Thus far, Faith in Place has focused on providing assistance in the sourcing and installation of regionally native plants to create butterfly gardens on the premises of numerous houses of worship in the Chicago area, including Lutheran, Episcopal, Mennonite, Quaker, and Unitarian communities. Growing out of this, however, several churches have also chosen to participate in habitat-restoration projects in local natural areas and forest preserves, providing opportunities and incentives for urban residents who had not previously done so to engage in conservation activities beyond the city bounds.

1 See particularly the “About Us” and “Our Programs” pages.

2 *Faith in Place*, “Migration and Me,” <http://www.faithinplace.org/our-programs/migration-me>.

As I have argued elsewhere (Rigby 2016), such acts of anticipatory hospitality towards more-than-human others—preparing for them a place of rest and sustenance along their journey, or a new home in which to abide—will be increasingly called for as ever more communities and species are displaced and disoriented by the calamitous impacts of anthropogenic global warming, along with other drivers of habitat destruction. In performing the work of deep sustainability, such acts are also sowing the seeds of a new kind of green urban culture, characterized by the cultivation of multispecies practices of care and conviviality among diverse communities of engaged eco-citizens.

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