



ECOLOGIES

T.J. Demos, "Ecologies," in *Public Space? Lost and Found*, ed., Gediminas Urbonas, Ann Lui and Lucas Freeman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

Not one, but many, “ecologies” name a multiplicity of knowledge systems and practices that are far from continuous. Some among these are historically and, at present, directly in conflict—a conflict that is nothing less than cosmopolitical in scope, involving a struggle over what kind of world we want to live in, how we relate to others, and indeed who “we” are.

Neoliberal ecologies comprise financialization options, cap and trade economics, and market-based mechanisms. Said to address climate change, in actual fact they primarily operate to increase wealth. By greenwashing corporate activities, they save capitalism politically by making it look green and climate-friendly. Neoliberal ecologies also include directives toward ethical consumerism, as if we were able to shop our way out of the apocalypse—anything to avoid government intervention in the market’s freedom to extract ever more resources from planet earth.¹

Colonial and neocolonial ecologies take shape as a science of empire, in which botanical, geological, mapping, and extractivist practices work at the sites where knowledge and power conspire in asserting Western imperial rule. That rule is currently defined through institutional, legal, and trade arrangements that correlate with structural inequities along lines of race, gender, and class; they’re of a piece with the biogenetic capitalism of bioprospecting, searching for patentable species and untapped genetic systems for medicinal and pharmaceutical applications, as well as pillaging Indigenous knowledge for corporate profits—what activist Vandana Shiva calls biopiracy.² Needless to say, these systems are determinedly anthropocentric, viewing the non-human environment as an infinite source of material for human consumption, and, at present, refusing to acknowledge the damage done to the world we live in.

Then there are *radical* and *creative ecologies*: those that build on the science of connectivity that formed the original definition of the term “ecology,” as coined by Ernst Haeckel in 1866, and remove it from its colonial varieties. More recent, post-anthropocentric ecologies attempt to decolonize natures from their capture by financial logics and resist neoliberalism’s attempt to subject the web of life to economic values.

Indigenous ecologies typically defend the intrinsic worth (the value of life itself) in the environment and its beyond-the-human inhabitants in order to resist the privatization of everything,³ proclaiming “water is life” or “water is alive,” as

protesters/protectors did recently at Standing Rock in opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Political ecologies insist that the environment cannot be separated from the political, economic, technological, and social frameworks in which it is inextricably situated, refusing thus to divide nature from culture. Gregory Bateson famously proposed an ecological epistemology, an “ecology of the mind,” indicating the subjective stakes of environmental thinking; György Kepes charted an aesthetic-ecological consciousness; and Félix Guattari’s *Three Ecologies* usefully schematized the levels of psychic, institutional, and environmental ecologies.⁴ In general, *political ecologies* are insistently intersectionalist and examine the unequal distribution of costs and benefits of environmental changes according to social, cultural, geographical, and economic differences, and in relation to their uneven implications. *Ecologies without nature* reject nature’s fictitious and colonialist purity, not only owing to the thesis of the Anthropocene, according to which human activities are now seen as determining the earth’s systems; but also for historical reasons, noting that nature has been infused with anthropogenic impacts for tens of thousands of years. This is why feminist science-studies theorists like Donna Haraway deploy terms like *naturecultures*, *symbiogenesis*, and *sympoietics* without hyphens. We need a new language for these new ecologies.

These latter versions correlate with ecologies of New Materialism, Object-Oriented Ontology, and Speculative Realism—all recent approaches to objects beyond human epistemological concerns, which view the outside as composed of vital matter with agential capacities and which propose multina-tural and multiperspectival complexities.⁵ Rather than multiculturalism’s many perspectives on a single nature, these posit various situated views on multiple natures, where being itself is understood as heterogeneous.⁷ Critical commentators have also pointed out the frequent elision of Indigenous knowledge traditions in much Western theory, which has recently “discovered” the world beyond the human but often fails to reference longstanding aboriginal beliefs and practices; the challenge remains to create new ecologies of decolonial academic practice.⁸

Finally, *aesthetic ecologies* bring the environment into human multisensory awareness, cognitive grasp, and affective

sensibility. They sense industrial and violent corporate impacts as well as positive expressions of creative mutuality, interdisciplinary practice, and experimental pedagogies that support well-being and justice in their widest senses (including economic, racial, gendered equalities, and sustainable biodiversities). Sometimes located within artistic practice, sometimes in experimental visual and multisensory cultures, they close the gap between scientific knowledge and phenomenological experience, and importantly articulate how *creative ecologies*—as generative, connective, and heterogeneous—can raise environmental awareness, transform fundamental values, build alliances across sectors, and infuse social movements with progressive political energy.

- 1 Richard Smith, *Green Capitalism: The God that Failed* (Bristol: College Publications on behalf of the World Economics Association, 2016).
- 2 Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge* (Boston: South End Press, 1997).
- 3 Salma Monani and Joni Adamson, eds., *Ecocriticism and Indigenous Studies: Conversations from Earth to Cosmos* (New York: Routledge, 2017); and T.J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).
- 4 See: Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972); György Kepes, *Arts of the Environment* (New York: Braziller, 1972); and Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athlone, 2000).
- 5 Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 6 See: Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 7 Eduardo Viveiros De Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, ed. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2014).
- 8 Zoe Todd, “An Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn: ‘Ontology’ Is Just Another Word for Colonialism,” *Ur-bane Adventurer: Amiskwaci* (blog), October 24, 2014.