

YES WE CANNIBAL



EMPTINESS
ECOLOGIES

EMPTINESS ECOLOGIES

December 17th, 2022 – February 4th, 2023

A multimedia exhibition and series of events.

Featuring

Dr. John Clark

Dawn DeDeaux

Emily Duke and Cooper Battersby

Chihiro Ito

Laura Marris

Clarissa Ribeiro

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Additional Participants

Simon Berz

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Dr. Allison K. Young

**Cognitive Dissonance and *Civil Twilight at the
Vernal Equinox***

Courtney P. Taylor

On Emptiness: An Essay in Ten Negations

Laura Marris

Emptiness Ecology

Dr. John Clark

Cognitive Dissonance and *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox*

Courtney P. Taylor

00:17 | Civil Twilight

Civil twilight is the brightest phase of twilight—a short period at both dawn and dusk when the sun is between 6 and 12 degrees. Before dusk, this is often the time when shared activities occur before light disappears.

In the film *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox*, the Anthropocene looms just as spring looms. Melting ice, an aesthetic trope of the Anthropocene, keeps climate change present throughout the film.

Could civil twilight be a metaphor in our apocalyptic Anthropocene mythology for the Industrial Revolution, the brief period when fossil fuels burn brightly before a more enduring dusk befalls us?

Or might we read it more hopefully as the moments before sunrise—just before we abandon our apathies and find ways to transform the larger-than-life systems that seem impossible to

derail as they carry us toward an apocalyptic horizon?

This essay represents a brief moment of sharing—a civil twilight if you will, of thinking with and through the film. Duke and Battersby conceive of *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox* as “kicking the tires” on sweetness, questioning empathy and its limits. I want to join them.

We all share in the fragmented dissonance of our era marked by a barrage of looming disasters, media spectacles, and consumer capitalism, but, as in the film, life goes on—birth, death, rebirth...at least until it doesn't.

Reflecting on her impetus to create *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox*, Emily Duke describes the energetic power—a sharp, palpable energy shift she felt—when a baby entered a space during a film festival panel.

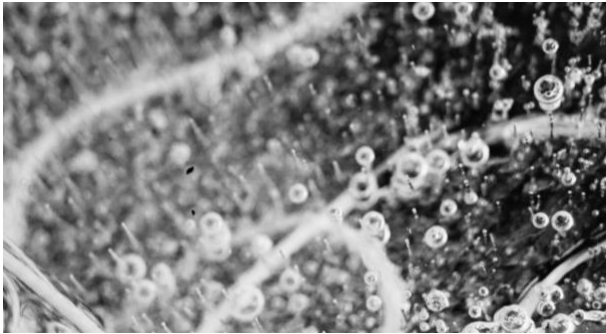
This energy was a response to cuteness.

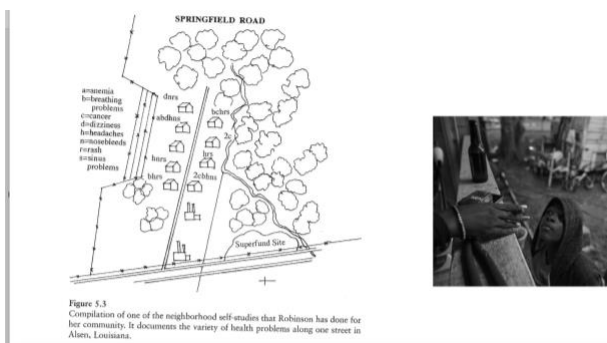
Moments later, Duke's own feelings transitioned to anger as she realized men seemed to be rolling their eyes, anxious to return to more important matters at hand.

So, in my infertile, and for now medically induced fertile state, I can't help but at least momentarily

consider *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox* as a metaphor for my own closing reproductive window alongside the cognitive dissonances of this era and the environmental realities of Baton Rouge as the northern point of Cancer Alley.

In 2020, the vernal equinox was March 20, three days after the first Covid-19 shutdown in Baton Rouge. On the final day elective surgeries were allowed in Louisiana, ten days after the shutdown, a second set of my dusky eggs were retrieved.





[Still from Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox with melting ice and synthetic materials; my unfrozen embryo; Screengrab of Florence Robinson's map of Springfield Road families affected by toxic pollution in 1970s Alsen, LA, grabbed from photographer Stacy Kranitz' website.]

I had learned during my first egg retrieval that my anti-Mullerian hormone level—an indicator of ovarian reserve and by extension reproductive capacity—were low for my age. My eggs, it turns out, were also dark and grainy for a thirty-two-year-old.

Twilight was upon me.

The privileges that derive from my whiteness, socio-economic status, and employer-provided insurance coverage granted access to fertility treatment, and I'm now caring for a 21-month-old and carrying my second child.

6:44 | Empathy

Duke and Battersby's statement accompanying *Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox* begins, "Art is for empathy, and empathy is for the reduction of suffering. At least, that's how we always justified choosing it as our vocation."

empathy:

the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

vocation:

a person's employment or main occupation, especially regarded as particularly worthy and requiring great dedication.

Empathy and vocation were familiar words at my insular liberal arts college and drove me toward a curatorial profession that brought me to Baton Rouge in 2016.

On November 8, of that year, I left an election party with the realization that Hillary Clinton's returns weren't producing the result for which we'd hoped. I also realized my family's nineteen-year-old schnauzer-poodle rescue, Phoebe, who I had gladly inherited upon leaving home and cared for throughout her decline, had stopped eating.

I awoke on November 9th went into the office on the verge of tears accepting that Trump had won and that I had to arrange to let my beloved dog go.

I made a vet appointment.
I left the office early.
I went home, cuddled her.

A few hours later, I felt that distinct, disturbing final shift in mass that marks the transition from life to lifeless. The person who would become my partner waited in a different room.

In a new relationship, I couldn't let him fully into this vulnerable moment.

The next day I went back into the office. I was working on an exhibition of Julie Heffernan's latest work that critically engaged climate change, capitalist excess, and our creative response.

Ironically enough, I titled the exhibition *When the Water Rises* just before a thousand-year flooding event in Baton Rouge.

I had some trouble fully letting go, perhaps a bit like Duke, who skinned her beloved cats and retained the pelts. Two of her cats (pelts) are featured in *Civil Twilight*.

I had Phoebe frozen. Freezing and unfreezing were to become important processes in my life. I was determined that she re-enter the earth, and its cycles of decomposition and recomposition, on my family's land in Arkansas.

In my father's woodshop, I stroked the fur of her still hard, frozen body asking my dad to remove the non-biodegradable padding with which he'd thoughtfully outfitted the burial box he'd built.

Meanwhile, my mother and sisters distanced themselves from my emotional and behavioral extremes back in the house.

The year 2016 seemed to initiate a dizzying period. I moved to Baton Rouge in the same summer as Alton Sterling's extrajudicial killing and the thousand-year flood. I had lost my dog and started a new relationship while fully committing to my dream profession—duties not hours—in what I felt was my vocation. I also got a prescription for anxiety medication. Empathy. Vocation.

Perhaps drawn to the same empathy-building capacity that drew Duke and Battersby to art, I felt my curatorial role was grounded in facilitating connection, critical thinking, and empathy around art. In the back of my mind, I kept a study demonstrating that museum visits increased critical thinking, historical empathy, and tolerance.



[Still from Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox featuring pelt of former pet cat; me with Phoebe 11/9/16; woman with pet in aftermath of 2016 flooding.]

In summer of 2021, six weeks post-partum, I was driving a Home Depot truck dropping off lumber to produce exhibition furniture. I halted installations to pump and care for my child. By October 2021, I was burned out along with the rest of America. It turns out “I no longer dreamed of labor,” as the viral millennial refrain goes. The entire arts ecosystem, for me had become empty, defined by churning out exhibitions at the speed of our late capitalist attention economy and contorting programming to fit into a neoliberal outcomes-based, capacity-building, donor-defined funding ecosystem. I joined the great resignation.

7:17 | Oxytocin

oxytocin

a hormone released by the pituitary gland that causes increased contraction of the uterus during labor and stimulates the ejection of milk into the ducts of the breasts.

Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox's two protagonists offer opposing views on oxytocin and the moral relationship humans have with “kids and dogs and trees and stuff.”

Gun rights activist and influencer Kyle K. takes a residual Enlightenment approach: he makes a mechanistic, rationalist claim: “Oxytocin is powerful stuff, it makes us feel content and warm and happy,” but these chemically induced feelings can also be felt by the most immoral among us.

Nell Turin narrates the discovery of a clean fuel sourced from experiences of cuteness “most potently” from interspecies love, but also babies, old couples kissing, and juvenile vertebrate encounters generally. A human finger outstretches toward a hedgehog.

The word oxytocin derives from Greek *oxutokia* meaning sudden delivery from the origins *oxus* meaning sharp and *tokos* meaning childbirth.

Oxytocin is also known as the “love” or “bonding” hormone and is closely associated with bonding after childbirth and breastfeeding. The oxytocin I expected to flow along with my milk did not come. Nor did the delight and euphoria—or the milk for that matter.

Rather than experiencing surges of love, affection, contentment, and warmth normally associated with the oxytocin releases during breastfeeding, I experienced something more dissonant: dysphoric milk ejection complex (DMER) is an under-recognized phenomenon resulting, for me, in

roughly two minutes of an extreme affective state of despair. I pumped roughly eight times a day for six months determined to deliver a Covid booster through breastmilk.

A year later, the stakes seemed lower. That October, I bought a \$25 hedgehog costume while reading articles about Halloween costumes and landfill waste.

“With cute we rule the world,” Nell Turin confidently affirms. *With cute do we ruin the world*, I wonder.



*[Still from Civil Twilight featuring juvenile vertebrate;
disgruntled daughter in hedgehog costume Halloween 2021;
Ronaldson Field Landfill in 2016, North Baton Rouge/Alsen.]*

East Baton Rouge Parish's landfills are located in North Baton Rouge. Industry and waste disposal are concentrated near Alsen, an African-American community established by the Freedman's Bureau in 1872, where 1950s rezoning cleared a path to concentrating industry and waste disposal in the area, effectively making it a sacrifice zone.

8:34 | Vectors

vector

an organism, typically a biting insect or tick, that transmits a disease or parasite from one animal or plant to another

a bacteriophage or plasmid which transfers genetic material into a cell, or from one bacterium to another.

In 2020 many of us who may not have even known the word vector learned that we could become vectors. Stories of vectors told through the lens of past plagues and the 1917 flu epidemic merged with this ecological moment to tell us of future vectors made possible through melting permafrost.

A recent study on the prevalence of mosquito vectors in two adjacent Baton Rouge neighborhoods demonstrated the inequitable

mosquito-borne disease risks between lower and higher socioeconomic neighborhoods.

Government Street delineates the northern border of the Old South Neighborhood, Baton Rouge's once thriving historically Black neighborhood, and The Garden District Neighborhood, an early suburb of Baton Rouge that represents tenets of the "Garden City Movement." *Yes We Cannibal* is located at 16th and Government Street. I live on the Garden District side of the neighborhoods under review just south of Government Street.

Discarded tires figure prominently in the study and, since I was joining Duke and Battersby in "kicking the tires," this research came to mind.

There are a higher number of abandoned properties in the Old South Neighborhood. Abandoned properties and empty lots often include discarded waste tires which become containers for standing water — and mosquitoes.

Included in this study is the *Aedes albopictus* species which are the primary vectors for Zika, dengue, chikungunya, and yellow fever — illnesses which can adversely, and unevenly, affect lower socioeconomic neighborhoods.

In 2018, Baton Rouge leaders lost a government contract for a tire shredding development aimed

at combatting issues related to illegal waste and “blight.” One factor in the stalled development was push back from the industrially saturated North Baton Rouge constituency, that includes the Alsen area.

On November 28, 2022, *The Advocate* reported that a tire shredding development was seeking approval to operate, having submitted plans to Louisiana’s Department of Environmental Quality to store waste tires on ten acres located on Springfield Road in Alsen—the same road Florence Robinson’s 1970s grassroots door-to-door illness study represents (image above.)

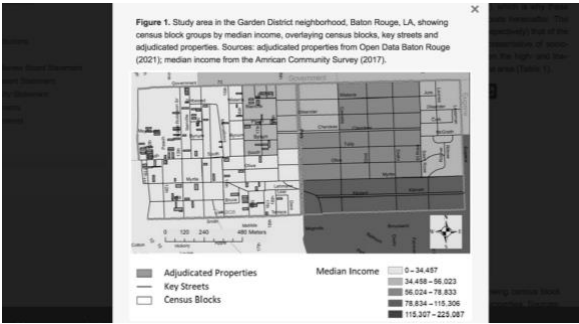
Early environmental justice activist and biology professor Florence Robinson returned to North Baton Rouge after earning her degrees. She purchased land in Devil’s Swamp, which she described as “absolute heaven” —perhaps the effects of nature-induced oxytocin releases?

She took frequent walks with her son. She grew a garden and collected berries sharing the bounty of this verdant land with neighbors.

She then describes the summer in 1974 when a sick baby acting as the “canary in the coal mine—the sensitive agent” roused her awareness of nearby environmental issues.

She began seeing chemical films coating the swamps' waters and a decline in wildlife. Multiple dogs of hers of different breeds had cancers. Robinson writes, "I don't know how a dog tells you 'I can't breathe.'" She describes the staining and then pitting of her puppy's teeth, the same pitting that happens in teeth of cattle near chemical plants and incinerators according to a veterinarian.

Robinson's experience is among twenty-five included in *Women Pioneers of the Louisiana Environmental Movement* a book which gathers together interviews from women who fought early environmental justice battles in the state.



GREENFIELD: YOU FORGOT TO DRAW OUR HOMES!

[Still from Civil Twilight at the Vernal Equinox featuring ice melt; Figure from de Jesús Crespo, Rebeca, Madison Harrison, Rachel Rogers, and Randy Vaeth. 2021. "Mosquito Vector Production across Socio-Economic Divides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana";

Descendants Project Instagram screenshot of post opposing erasure of community by proposed Greenfield Grain Elevator] Infertility, miscarriages, still births, and birth defects alongside asthma and other breathing problems, rashes, and high cancer rates are prevalent in the women's' descriptions throughout the book. Caring for sick children figures prominently in the women's decision to pursue activism.

Predominantly Black fence-line communities along Cancer Alley continue to organize against industry in Louisiana. Just this month, the *Descendants Project* shared Greenfield's imagery for a proposed grain eraser surrounding communities most vulnerable to exposure by depicting their development on an empty landscape. "Empty" landscapes ripe for development are perhaps the most historic aesthetic trope of the Anthropocene.

Emptiness Ecologies

Where are all these dissonant threads leading?

Living in Louisiana the past six years has been eye-opening. It is a place steeped in plantation romanticism and the violent afterlives of the plantation.

It is a place that experiences inequitable effects of climate change and disproportionately drives climate change.

Here, I've grown to question the limits of empathy and more fully recognize vulnerability both personally and ecologically.

I wish I could say that study of the entangled mechanisms Louisiana's ecosystem collapse(s) from levee-building to cypress harvesting to oil and gas canals to petrochemical toxicities, a new understanding of the emergence and sustenance of the environmental justice movement in Louisiana, or greater capacity for empathy through my own infertility and motherhood experiences has spurred me into meaningful action and engagement, but that's not the case yet.

If I could apply the cliché of fight or flight, I would categorize my response in the sometimes mentioned third category: freeze.

I still feel frozen, locked in a state of inaction—not of apathy, but crippling dissonance. I nod along with Maggie Nelson in *The Argonauts* as she wants to jam a stick in someone's eye amid the overuse "Reproductive Futurism" in climate activism, and yet I feel heartened by Patricia Hill Collins' notion of "othermothering," essentially caring and nurturing one's entire community, that Amy

Westervelt names in “Mothering in the Age of Extinction.”

This notion, so evident in the work of Louisiana’s environmental justice activists, holds promise—a depth of care so much deeper than cute.

I fear we are not getting closer to a cohesive closing and ultimately, there will be no summing up. Anna Tsing, in her popular Anthropocene text *The Mushroom at the End of the World* suggests “summing up” is the hallmark of modern knowledge—essentially part of the same modernist, progressivist ethos that led us to our current state. Tsing argues precarity defines our current condition. She characterizes precarity as the state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others.

Dissonance is a privilege—it offers a measure of escape.

Privilege obscures our shared vulnerabilities.

Racial, environmental, and socio-economic disparities are heightened at this moment of our civil twilight, this moment of potential shared action before we all enter states increasingly pronounced, undeniable precariousness.

Fence lines—visible and invisible, structural and imaginary — create borders limiting where we perceive vulnerability and limiting where we extend care to our community.

If emptiness, in the Buddhist sense of the word, comprises the idea that nothing is permanent or fully independent, that everything is interconnected and in constant flux — that everything is vulnerable to everything — then these ideas will become increasingly apparent as global warming truly becomes global.

On Emptiness: An Essay in Ten Negations

Laura Marris

0. You are reaching me at a time of emptiness. It's December—the dark days—in Buffalo, the light leaves at about 3:30pm. I'm on the tail of a long project which left my desk like a comet. The sky is dark and I'm eating its dust.
1. None of these things is really emptiness.
2. Years ago, I tried to teach my poetry students the concept of negative capability. It was the end of the semester—they were tired from the barrage of tests and papers—and I wanted to give them a way of knowing that could be an antidote, like holding a space inside themselves for truths they'd never have to perform. We got stuck, though, on negation—the rhetoric of calling things into being by insisting that they aren't there.
3. Like most impossible things, emptiness is a mystery.

4. It's not the same as loneliness, which peoples the mind with the figures of absent ones. I think of the writer Italo Calvino, who made up a traveler, and a series of cities—entire neighborhoods built to fill the interior of a mind. "Desires are already memories," he wrote, as his traveler sits on a wall, by the square, in a city that doesn't exist. Loneliness is felt by comparison—too tender, too aware of its opposites, to be empty.
5. Emptiness is a light that denies its shadows. No. It wants to consume its shadows. It has no gradation, no spectrum.
6. Early morning: blue hour. I'm still in bed. M has just gotten up to take one of our dogs to the vet for dental surgery. I can still feel the warmth of the small hollow where he slept between us, all ten pounds of him pressing the mattress like a hot water bottle. Deep in his mouth, several teeth have rotted into their own ecologies—reefs of bacteria, terraformed islands of greenish molar. The atmosphere they create taints his breath. When he comes home, I can see him feeling the gaps with his tongue. But two days later, he licks my nose, and it smells like nothing—the vast colonies of

microorganisms are gone. Soon, the holes in his gumline will heal, like the sea closing over a crater.

7. In 1950, the poet Richard Wilbur wrote a poem called "A World Without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness." He borrowed the line from Thomas Traherne, a Seventeenth Century poet and mystic whose visions included an empty basket floating in the air. Traherne's anonymity was evacuated after his death. Wilbur, though, was no ascetic. "O connoisseurs of thirst," he writes, in his poem on emptiness:

*Beasts of my soul who long to learn to drink
Of pure mirage, those prosperous islands are accurst
That shimmer on the brink*

Of absence.

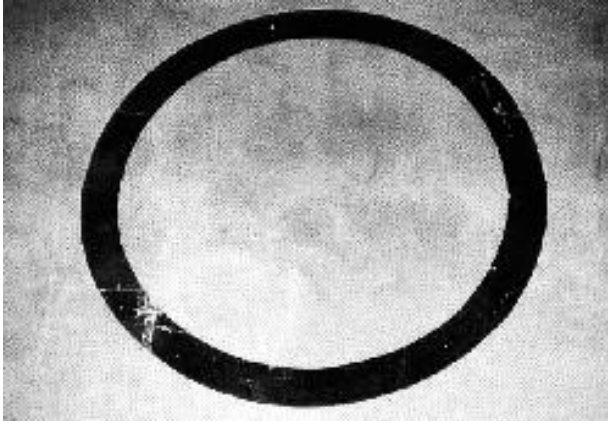
Emptiness is so hard to sustain that it sometimes feels like a magnet for all that comes howling back, everything you want to push away.

8. Six weeks ago, M's father died. His mouth, at the end, an implacable O, a rip in the fabric of meaning.

9. Emptiness is an emergency.

Emptiness Ecology

Dr. John Clark



Occupy Emptiness!

Fortunately, the manifesto was already written almost a thousand years ago:

Whip, rope, person, and bull - all
merge in No Thing.
This heaven is so vast, no message
can stain it.
How may a snowflake exist in a
raging fire. . . .
Here are the footprints of the
Ancestors.

Too many steps have been taken
returning to the root and the source.
Better to have been blind and deaf
from the beginning!
Dwelling in one's true abode,
unconcerned with and without –
The river flows tranquilly on and the
flowers are red.

Barefooted and naked of breast, I
mingle with the people of the world.
My clothes are ragged and dust-
laden, and I am ever blissful.
I use no magic to extend my life;
Now, before me, the dead trees
become alive.

["Ox Herding Pictures" by Kakuan in
Reps, Zen Flesh, Zen Bones, p. 151]

The Practice of Emptiness

So, there it is (though it always is what it isn't!):

merging in No Thing
returning to the root
mingling with the people of the
world

No Nature

According to the classic *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines*, the things of nature “have only one nature” and that is “no nature.” [quoted in Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 356.]

Hakuin Zenji, the major figure in Rinzai Zen, refers to “self-nature that is no nature . . . far beyond mere doctrine.” [quoted in Snyder, *No Nature*, p. v.]

Buddhist poet Gary Snyder comments on this passage that “the greatest respect we can pay to nature is not to trap it, but to acknowledge that it eludes us and that our own nature is also fluid, open, and conditional.” [Snyder, *No Nature*, p. v.]

What we will be exploring here is an Emptiness Ecology inspired by an eco-Buddhism as is expressed on the lines just quoted. In such an eco-Buddhism, the “eco” part comes from *oikos*, the household: our home, our home place, our homeland, our home planet, the Earth. The “buddh” part means the awakened mind. And what about the “ist” part? Forget it! That’s what. So, the eco-Buddhist idea is about having an awakened mind that is an expression of the Earth’s awakened mind, and about what follows from that.

Which is a lot, since, as Dogen says,

when the Buddhas and the Patriarchs categorically state that the mind is plants and trees, revise your preconceptions and understand plants and trees as mind. If the Buddha is said to be tile and pebble, consider tile and pebble as the Buddha. If you change your basic preconceptions, you will be able to gain the Way. [Addiss, *Zen Sourcebook*, p. 89]

Some Jewels, Marks, Truths and a Path

The teaching of emptiness, and thus Emptiness Ecology, come out of a tradition of teachings. So, it might be helpful to give a very brief whirlwind tour of those teachings so what follows (such all things being emptiness of inherent, self-dependent existence) might make more sense. The most important teachings are summed up in those Jewels, Marks, Truths and Path that are appropriately capitalized and bolded above.

The Three Jewels are identified as *Buddha*, *dharma*, and *sangha*. The term *Buddha* signifies the awakened mind, the experience that is at the heart of Buddhist thought and practice and is used to refer to beings who have experienced perfect, exemplary awakening; the *dharma* consists of the teachings that help point people toward this

experience and can also mean the Way of Nature; and the *sangha* is the compassionate community that puts the teachings into engaged practice.

The Three Marks of Existence include *anitya*, the impermanence of all things; *anatman*, the absence of an enduring, substantial self or of separate selfhood; and *duhkha*, the suffering or pervasive sense of dissatisfaction that accompanies our ubiquitous destructive desires and attachments.

The Four Noble Truths, the beginning point of Shakyamuni's formal teaching, start with the recognition of the third of these marks, universal suffering, then present a diagnosis of its cause and cure, and finally explain the path or practice by which the cure can be effected. The cure is seen as liberation from destructive forms of desire and craving through a practice of non-attachment, non-egoism, awakened consciousness, and compassion. The details of this practice are presented in the Noble Eightfold Path. This Path begins with wisdom, which includes right views and right intention, continues with the ethical life, which encompasses right speech, right action, and right livelihood, and concludes with spiritual discipline, which comprises right effort, right mindfulness, and right meditation.

Empty but Deadly

Buddhist philosophical psychology begins with an analysis of ego-experience and suffering. It sees suffering arises from what are called the Three Poisons, identified as mental confusion (ignorance), destructive attractions (desire), and destructive aversions (hatred). These evils are linked to the power of the ego illusion, which encompasses disordered feelings, perceptions, and mental constructs. According to the Buddhist analysis, we are obsessed with defending the ego through a futile quest to dominate a fugitive, ungraspable reality.

Faced with the constant failure of this project, we experience both ourselves and the world around us as unsatisfactory and frustrating. Our own suffering leads us to inflict suffering on other human beings and other beings in nature, and to attempt to dominate and control them in pursuit of our impossible egocentric goals. Egocentrism takes on a multitude of forms, ranging from egoistic self-hatred and self-destruction to egoistic delusions of an expanded, universalized or eternalized selfhood.

According to the Buddhist analysis, release from suffering comes through wisdom in action which includes an everyday practice of non-aggressive, non-dominating speech and activity; a vocation and way of life based on non-violence and non-domination; an openness to deeper experience of

what we falsely objectify as internal egoic selfhood and external nature; and an openness to mind itself as non-dominated, non-dominating, joyful embracing of a rich, wild, and creative reality. Snyder has written of such consciousness, the awakened state central to Buddhist practice, as “wild mind,” by which he means mind that is permitted to act freely and spontaneously, exhibiting the complexity, diversity, creativity, and anarchic order that wild nature manifests in all of its expressions.

Face It: It’s the Egocene

Well, of course, it is, and it isn’t. It’s all a matter of perspective. Looked at from the standpoint of the Earth, the Geo-logical perspective, we should probably best call it *the Necrocene*, the New Era of Death on Earth, the successor to the Cenozoic, the Era of New Life on Earth (literally, of new animals).

Looked at from the macro-social perspective, some would like to call it *the Capitalocene*, to recognize the Big Cause of the Necrocene. Recognizing mega-causality is a good idea, but “Capitalocene” seems to do only about one-quarter of the job, at best. Capitalism is clearly one of the major forms of social domination of our age, but there are others.

So, we should say not only that we are in *the Capitalocene*, to recognize capitalist domination, but also *the Patriarchocene* or *Androcene*, to recognize patriarchal domination, *the Imperiocene* or *Statocene*, to recognize statist domination, and *the Technocene*, to recognize domination by the technological Megamachine. And then, to move to the micro-social level, there is *the Egocene*, which is one of our major concerns here.

But please don't insult the Earth by calling it "the Anthropocene." That doesn't work on the Geological, the macro-social or the micro-social level. It does, however, direct us to a related issue, the tendency of many ecological thinkers (actually, in most cases, not-so-ecological "environmental" thinkers) to blame our catastrophe, called in eco-shorthand "the Anthropocene," on "anthropocentrism."

Thus, anthropocentrism becomes the purported source of human domination of nature. However, it is important to understand that anthropocentrism functions not as the *major underlying cause* of ecologically destructive, but rather as *an ideology* used to legitimate egocentric action, which underlies all the other determinants of ecological catastrophe.

When a corporate board member assesses market conditions, efficiency, and potential profitability in

utilizing a certain production or marketing strategy, or when an individual consumer considers the costs and benefits of buying a certain product, the results of those decisions often play a crucial role in the destruction of species and ecosystems, the disruption of global climate, or the poisoning of the natural environment. However, the individual decision-maker in such cases does not ordinarily in the course of decision-making fantasize about human superiority over nature, or explicitly appeal to an anthropocentric value theory.

In fact, the very concept of "nature" in any form may be very far from the focus of consciousness in the immediate process of decision-making. The decision-making agent I question may even have no difficulty engaging in ecologically destructive decision-making even while holding a self-image of "nature-lover," or "environmentalist."

The crucial problem is not that the agent necessarily wills overtly the domination of nature and affirms anthropocentric ideology, but rather that he or she abstracts an individual, egocentric conception of good from the larger system of social and ecological goods.

It is true that the systems of production and consumption that depend on such structurally determined decisions are then sometimes *justified*

in anthropocentric terms. Consequently, anthropocentrism is a powerful legitimating ideology for the domination of nature, and indeed a conditioning context for individual acts of choice.

But if we examine the psychology of eco-cidal (and also inhumane) decision-making, we find at its core the ego-illusion and the operation of (self-defeating) ego-illusion-reinforcing mechanisms.

The egocentric perspective that is the object of Buddhist critique is the psychological basis of the domination of humanity and nature. Attachment to the illusion of a separate ego creates deep insecurity, because it leads one to be always haunted by the nothingness, or lack, that one can never banish from this constructed selfhood as it is actually experienced. Through attachment to the ego, we fall into a kind of bad faith in which these intimations of emptiness are repressed, projected, and denied.

The result of our insecurity, or perhaps more precisely, our flight from this insecurity, is an often-destructive quest for power, control, and possession. This quest is directed, whether consciously or unconsciously, toward ourselves, toward other human beings, toward the world of things, and toward the natural world. The symptoms of this malaise range from a lack of care

for and attention to both ourselves and others in our daily lives to an absence of care for and attention to the entire biosphere and all the sentient and non-sentient beings that are integral parts of it.

Where Y'at? Being No Where in No Nature

Buddhist theory and practice aim precisely at dissolving the basis for the egocentric mechanisms that are integral to these processes of domination. The goal of Buddhist ethics is a practice of non-domination expressed through such “immeasurables” or “sublime states” (*Brahma-Viharas*) as unconditional love (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). And the first of the Five Precepts or Dedications is *panatipata* or “abstaining from the killing of any sentient being,” an injunction that is often interpreted more positively as encouraging the flourishing of all forms of life. This ethics of compassion and care is grounded in turn on a non-egoistic ontology includes an incisive critique of all forms of atomistic individualism and false abstractionism, a critique founded on the central doctrine of *pratitya samutpada* or dependent origination.

As Nagarjuna teaches, a being can only be understood adequately as part of a system of

relations. On the basis of such a philosophical position, there are good reasons to hold that value cannot be contained within the bounds of any single being, but rather must be seen as something that exists between and among non-separate beings. Thus, our love and compassion must extend outward not only to "other" sentient beings (which are not ontologically "other,"), but also to the interrelated, mutually determining and dependently originating communities of life, and to the ecological wholes (or holons) of which they are a part. From Nagarjuna's perspective, there is no ontological basis for simply locating value or worthiness of moral consideration, compassion, or care within the boundaries of individual beings.

Thus, Nagarjuna's philosophy of emptiness and dependent origination, combined with what we now know about the nature of value in ecosystems (systemic value), quite consistently leads to an expansion of Buddhist compassionate practice of care and concern beyond individual centers of valuing (sentient beings) to larger ecological realities.

Buddhist negative dialectic is an attack on the confusion, ignorance, and illusion about the nature of beings that leads to suffering. It is also an attack on the destructive attachments that accompany this confused thinking and lead to grasping, violence, and domination. It dialectically

destroys various forms of knowledge as objectification, reification, domination, and appropriation, so that in the absence of such forms, experience can open itself more fully to that which is experienced.

What is experienced in this process includes all that we conventionally call “nature.” This nature is seen as the realm of *samsara*, the endless cycle of change, while *nirvana* is seen as the awakened and liberated state. But awakening is awareness of precisely such unending change. It is awakening to the true nature, or non-nature, of nature. Accordingly, Nagarjuna states that

There is not the slightest difference
Between cyclic existence [*samsara*] and
nirvana.

There is not the slightest difference
Between nirvana and cyclic existence
[*samsara*].

[Garfield trans., *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, p. 75]

The world in which one finds liberation and awakening is the world of ordinary experience, the world of change from which so many philosophers East and West have fled in horror since ancient times.

The nature that is experienced is therefore a nature that is “no nature,” that is, nature without identity, essence, substantiality, or “self-being.” But it is also nature that is most authentically nature, for it is nature that is experienced in its activity of “naturing,” or being just as it is.

Sunyata and Tathata: Non-Being and Somethingness

It’s ironic that Nagarjuna’s critique of the substantiality of things has sometimes been labeled “nihilistic,” for his central practical and theoretical project entails an explicit attack on nihilism. Nihilism was a sickness in his age, and it can perhaps be called *The Sickness of our Age*.

Nihilism for Nagarjuna means a negation of and loss of faith in reality and in nature. It is an attempt to escape from the real world, that is, the world of the phenomena in all their richness of “suchness” or “thusness.” He attacks ruthlessly (that is, with *ruthless compassion*) all conceptual escapes from reality, all substitutions of illusions for the realities of experience.

Nagarjuna holds that when one approaches the world with a non-attached engagement, the realities that one experiences are found to be “empty.” That is, they are empty of inherent existence, essence, identity, substantiality, or “self-

nature." To say that all things are empty is merely another way of saying that they are dependently arising; that is, that they have no ultimate existence separate from the web of conditions and relations of which they are a part, and which are a part of them. They exist as "objects" or "things" only as conventional abstractions resulting from our processes of conceptualization. There are thus two levels of truth: the conventional (or relative) and the ultimate.

Conventional truths are conceptual and verbal but play a quite real ontogenetic and phylogenetic role in view of their pragmatic value in both individual and species development. Our concepts are of instrumental value for a vast spectrum of purposes ranging from personal and collective survival and well-being to the control and domination of other beings. Identity and substantiality are therefore at best eminently useful fictions. Unfortunately, at worst they can be personally, socially, and ecologically destructive delusions. An awareness of the empty, dependently arising nature of all things in nature reveals the relativity of such fictions and delusions and leads one to embrace the ultimate, that is, the non-conventional level of truth.

In short, there is no substantial "thing" that lies somewhere beyond our experience of natureless nature expressing itself. The individual tree as we

conceive of it is an epistemological abstraction from a larger matrix of experience (think “somethingness” without a “thing”), just as the individual organism is an ecological abstraction from a larger network of ecosystemic processes.

In even shorter, substantiality and essence are not “qualities of things” but more or less meaningful or useful ways of thinking about so-called “things.”

Such seemingly abstract ontological and epistemological questions have profound ecological implications. For example, our ecological predicament stems in large part from our egocentric fixations and our consequent inability to shift from an egocentric spatiotemporal perspective. Ecological consciousness depends on our ability to extend our consciousness—and our compassion and concern—to realms of being both larger and smaller than those that are typically the object of egocentric interest. These include, for example, the levels at which we can consider the richness and diversity of species within ecosystems, the genetic qualities of populations, and the overall health of the biosphere.

“Hyperobjects” are not a big deal for Buddhist philosophy (even apart from the fact that there really aren’t ultimately any objects). There are macro-non-objects, meso-non-objects, and micro-

non-objects. And everything-in-between-non-objects. And more than that. We can, of course refer to all of these non-objects as “objects,” for practical purposes, as skillful means. This is all part of the eco-logic that we need to learn in order to navigate the Way (through Heraclitean Vajra-Thunderbolt steering, we might say).

All (Non) You Need is Love

[Note on “You”: If “you” need a pronoun to call “your” own, perhaps it should be “y’all,” the pronoun of Plural Singularity. Or maybe, “all y’all,” the pronoun of Plural Plurality. For “you” are “all.” Except for the fact that the “all” is a “non-all. And you are a “non-you.” Otherwise, go with it! It is after “all,” “otherwise”!]

The practice of non-attachment, non-egoism and compassion that is (non-foundationally) fundamental to Buddhism includes compassion not only for humans but for all sentient beings. It is the expression of an ethics of compassion that accords moral consideration not only to human beings but to all sentient beings, to communities of sentient beings and to the ecological wholes/holons of which they are parts, and (to look at it in the most non-objectifying manner) to the entire matrix of sentience in the natural world.

But in considering the axiology of sentience we might well consider Nagarjuna's wish:

May I always be an object of enjoyment
For all sentient beings according to their
wish
And without interference, as are the earth,
Water, fire, wind, herbs, and wild forests.
[Komoto, ed. *Nagarjuna's Seventy Stanzas*,
162]

The Buddhist ideal of contributing to the enjoyment of all sentient beings seems to imply an ethical practice that encompasses both compassionate forbearance and also compassionate beneficent action in regard to sentient beings in the natural world, and by necessary implication, to larger ecological realities.

Moreover, Nagarjuna's aspiration seems to have further implications from an ecological perspective. His goal includes being an "object of enjoyment" for sentient beings in a particular manner: the way that the "water, wind, herbs, and wild forests" fulfill this role. It is noteworthy that these natural beings perform such a function

unintentionally, through *active inaction* rather than through moment-to-moment rational calculation.

So how is it that we can contribute to the larger good in the manner of these beings in the natural world, so that the fulfillment of our negative duties is turned “effortlessly” into the fulfilling of our positive ones?

When we live our lives as ecologically cooperative beings, the necessary result is that we make a positive contribution to the good of all living beings through our place in the interconnected web of ecological relationships. When we discover a mode of flourishing that contributes to the flourish of other beings, our “inaction” (Daoist *wuwei*, or acting without acting), we play a role ranging from that of being habitat for mitochondria, to that of participant in food chains, to that of contributor to the oxygen-carbon dioxide cycle.

The Material Basis of Emptiness

This conclusion is good ontology, good axiology, and even good science, we should add. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch contend, based on experimental evidence, that “the experience of the groundlessness of *sunyata* [that is, *emptiness*] or the (positively defined) sudden glimpse of the natural, awake state itself” results in a “fundamental

warmth toward the phenomenal world that practitioners report arises from absolute experience and that manifests itself as concern for the welfare of others beyond mere naive compassion." [Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p. 250]

This experiential process can be seen as a reanimation of feelings of care and sympathy that are deeply rooted in human historical experience and evolution. They reflect several hundred thousand years of human life in small cooperative, egalitarian communities.

In a striking depiction, Nagarjuna contends that "the root of cyclic existence," the continual reappearance of the ego, lies in "action" (*karma*), by which he means grasping, greed, and the quest to dominate reality. The basis for action is in turn found in ignorance, that is, the failure to realize the emptiness of the ego and all objects, and the futility of pursuing desires that cannot be satisfied. He concludes (expressing what might be seen as a Buddhist version of Laozi's wuwei) that:

The root of cyclical existence is action.
Therefore, the wise one does not act.
Therefore, the unwise is the agent.
The wise one is not because of his insight.
With the cessation of ignorance

Action will not arise.

[Garfield *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. pp. 339-40.]

As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch note of such experience, “[o]ne’s very habitual patterns of grasping, anxiety, and frustration are the contents of mindfulness and awareness. The recognition that those are empty of any actual existence manifests itself experientially as an ever-growing openness and lack of fixation.” [Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, p. 234]

The challenge presented by Buddhist negative dialectic is a similar one: it presents us with a choice between two paths. One is that of living in a world of false and destructive (and ultimately *empty*, in the sense of null and void) abstractions. The other is that of opening ourselves up to non-attached but engaged experience, the source of a life of joy and of compassion for all sentient beings, and, by implication, for the communities of life and larger ecological wholes/holons (part-whole-parts) of which they are expressions.

So, Smash the Ego, Patriarchy, Capital, State and Megamachine (and Have a Nice Day!)

This helps us understand the fundamental human predicament: that we are faced with a dream

world of illusory, deceptively permanent objects and egos, and a futile quest to defend the ego and dominate reality. Where most analyses (including most Buddhist analyses) of egocentric consciousness and the egoic flight from the trauma of lack stop short is in failing to investigate the social and historical roots of these phenomena. We must understand that the ego is not only a psychological and epistemological construct, but also a historical one.

The roots of this psycho-historical phenomenon (you may have suspected that we are living in psychohistory) are to be found in the development of large-scale agrarian society and regimented labor, the rise of the state and ancient despotism, the emergence of economic class and acquisitive values, the triumph of patriarchy and warrior mentality—in short, in the course of social evolution, beginning with the ancient system of social domination and the domination of nature. To put it in Buddhist terms, our true karmic burden, both personally and collectively, is our profound historicity and our deep materiality.

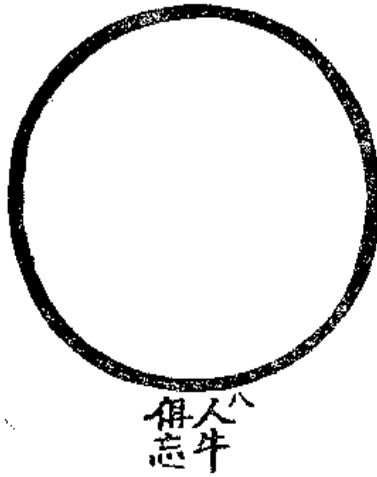
A full account of the history of the ego would explore its long evolution from that point onward in dialectical relationship with such institutions as patriarchy, the state, and the system of economic exploitation of humanity and nature, culminating in the present globalized society of transnational

corporate capital, the nation-state system, the technological megamachine, and the mass-consumer culture. Indeed, it can be argued that although the ideology and practice of domination go back to the origins of civilization, their tragic implications can only be understood through their developed expression in today's violent, ecocidal project of global domination by economic, political, military, and technological means. Undoing the ego means undoing not only the psychological legacy but also the social legacy of that history of domination.

In considering the relation of the Buddhist critique of the ego to this history, it is important to remember that original Buddhism was in many ways a revolt against the emerging system of domination: the rebellion of the awakened, embodied, open and responsive mind against a deadened, dualistic, divided, and alienated consciousness that was the product of that system. It was the revolt of an ecological consciousness against the egological consciousness. (Heraclitus knew this too: he warned against the replacement of the common logos by the individual-egoic logos).

According to the Buddhist Middle Way, it is by the most radical affirmation of "no nature" — the emptiness of nature and of our own nature — that we can finally save ourselves and nature from the

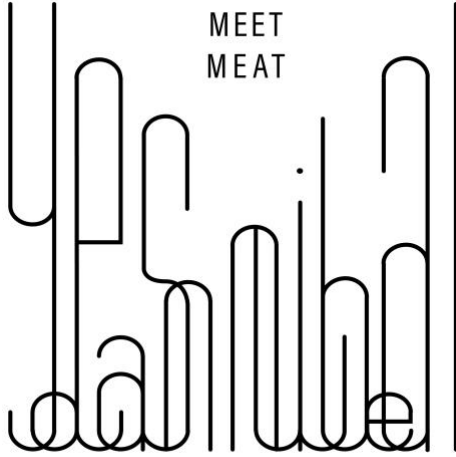
effects of our “own” destructive passions and delusions. In our age, the Necrocene, the new epoch of both biological and spiritual death on Earth, this means that it is perhaps only an Ecology of Emptiness that can save us from both extinction and nihilism.



[Oxherding Picture 10. Tomikichiro Tokuriki]

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