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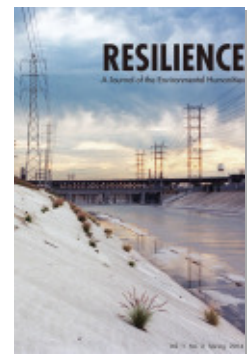
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Ecology, Race, and the Making of Environmental Publics: A  
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# Ecology, Race, and the Making of Environmental Publics

A Dialogue with *Silent Spring* in South Africa

LESLEY GREEN

The silence, in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, is that of birds in the aftermath of a chemical warfare on pests and weeds. But her book is also about another kind of silence: a political silence; a silence in the polis, of creatures and landforms that we call "nature."

Some fifty years after its publication, the book is remembered as the work that launched the environmental movement. The spring that was given voice, as it were, by Carson and then by environmental activists now also has constitutional standing in Ecuador, which has rewritten its constitution to include the rights of nature.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding many uncertainties over whether the law would survive in practice, in a test case in July 2011 the constitutional court of Ecuador awarded in favor of a river that had been polluted. At least three other governments, courts of law, or city councils have experimented with constitutional acknowledgments of the rights of nature: New Zealand granted legal rights of personhood to the Whanganui River in 2012; Bolivia's Law of Mother Earth was passed in 2011; and the city of Santa Monica passed its Sustainability Rights ordinance in 2013.<sup>2</sup>

Constitutions set the terms of the convocation of the polis. The re-writing of constitutions to include the rights of nature in the polis is a vocative moment for springs everywhere. If she were alive, perhaps Rachel Carson might consider titling a new volume *Vocal Rivers*.

Carson's silent spring and the sudden presence of springs, rivers, and

mountains in political convocations on three continents offer provocations to environmental debate in South Africa, from where I write, where the right to speak for nature is profoundly racialized, since voices raised in the protection of nature have an uneasy time escaping the scripts of race and racism. In a context in which conservation is increasingly implemented at the point of a gun or at the point of booms that open only to paying elites, the legacy of racism spills out like oil from a sunken ship. So-called free daily access to South Africa's national parks requires a membership—the annual price of which, for a family of four, is approximately that of the fee for a ten-year personal visa to enter the United States. Yet it is not just people—racialized, in the skewed economic categories of the country—who pay dearly for the nature-pays principle: nature can pay dearly too. In the perlemoen (abalone) fishery poachers can be robbed of their haul by a gang with bigger guns, who are stopped by marine inspectors equipped with even bigger guns, in order to confiscate the loot and pass it on to the state, which in turn sells it off in order to fund the preservation of perlemoen (abalone).<sup>3</sup> Perlemoen, in other words, must be poached in order to pay for the research and governance that will protect it. In moments like these, the wave of the logic of the nature-pays principle curls over onto itself, in not one but several respects. First the very marine legislation that has criminalized fishers and exacerbated the rise of poaching syndicates relies on the poachers to fund its implementation. Second the logic of governance itself renders perlemoen as biomass to be extracted, blindsiding its role in the political ecology of the kelp-based coastal ecosystem. Third the issue for political debate becomes not about the rights of nature, but about who has the rights to the natural biomass. Nature (perlemoen) becomes an object in a debate: perlemoen is a resource without voice or rights, that needs to be protected by government from humans who have no rights to it (poachers, Asian syndicates) in order to benefit other humans who do have rights to it (quota holders, marine inspectors, conservation scientists). Each of these categories, which themselves are produced in the tight ecology of political discourse and actions, are treated as given social identities: they become “stakeholders,” with little attention paid to the relations through which the categories come into being. What is at stake, in quota debates, is who gets to hold the steak; and the bigger stakes—the possible commercial extinction of species—are sidelined. Contestations in public debates can get

so intense that some arguments seem to goad people to burn others' stakes—and indeed, on the ground, anger is such that some set fire to government property in protest. In the Western Cape in late 2012, for example, abalone fishers and poachers tried to burn the police dog unit in an uprising against marine conservation management. South African dogs have long been an extension of racialized violence. The incident frames a moment in which post-apartheid government, racialized dogs, and abalone biomass are forced into an alliance against people who find themselves forced into the painfully familiar zone of extra-parliamentary struggle in which criminality, history, futures, and justice are in question.

Defended with the full military might of the state along the coast, the paradoxes of compliance-based approaches to nature conservation anger and alienate and scratch at the scars of race-based injustice. Several cases bear testimony to this: a matter currently before the South African Human Rights Commission concerns the fatal shooting of a wood harvester by rangers in the Transkei coast; a similar case concerns the shooting of a man who was harvesting shellfish in a Marine Protected Area (MPA).<sup>4</sup>

Evident in these moments are the tragedies of compliance-based environmental management: that it is blind to the relation of violence at its core, in which science and governance operate to control a relation with a nature that is defined by its capital value. It is equally blind to the ways in which the language and practices of compliance reenact a racialized authority in South African public space. When they cling determinedly to the argument that their work is a pure science devoid of human interests, fisheries scientists are unable to contest the ways in which their own work becomes hostage to capital interests when its research base shifts, as it has done, from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) to the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF). Conservation based on monetarization of extractable resources establishes the assets; their protection necessitates militarization. Amid the deep currents of history, it is unsurprising that an environmental public has been unable to gather in South Africa.

In common in Carson's *Silent Spring* and in the work of decolonial thinkers and post-humanists is an effort to explore what it means to think of nature as a part of the polis—in stark contrast to the extractivist logic of the knowledge economy in which nature comprises mute ob-

jects. In what follows I want to circle around the constitution of nature and race in South Africa, to try to get closer to understanding of why the relations of humans with environments appear quite so immovable in South Africa. Beginning with *Silent Spring* the focus moves to thinking about race and the rise of affirmative capital with its justification of extractive relations with nature as object.

## Sciences and Wars

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared sixteen years after the end of World War II. What might be the relevance of the text in South Africa, nineteen years after the formal ending of apartheid? Carson's task was to unravel the ways in which a science framed by wartime technologies had been turned against creatures of all kinds, with all the attendant devastations of war. Her book moved so many because it speaks to an ordinary, everyday experience of creatures and landscapes that explores the ways in which rivers, air, soils are sown into bodies, households, local stores, roadways, and farms. Carson's program was much more than pro-environment: it was a resistance to the logics of a version of science that was developed during World Wars I and II, and which, by the 1960s, had trained the new technologies developed in the war, on the environment. Throughout her books, she draws attention to the ways in which sciences of war had entered the everyday: trained on bugs and vermin, they were now part of every household. Hers is an intimate environmentalism: one that reframes the idea that environment is "out there"; that it is a matter for central government to decide, or that it is to be left to scientific experts. In making a case that the logics of war had come to inform scientific practice, she asked what those sciences meant for households, and the rivers, fields, rains, and species of which they are part.

Thinking about what the success of *Silent Spring* has to offer to the task of growing an environmentally minded public in South Africa now, I believe that grappling with the legacies and logics of our own wars for science here might be equally important. Where the means of defeating racism has become the extension of capital via Black Economic Empowerment, or BEE, there is a need to wrestle with what it means to do conservation science in the service of affirmative capital: that complex use of big capital to reverse decades of race-based impoverishment

by maintaining the logics of race. The logic of putting a toll plaza that includes a corporate suite on Chapman's Peak in Table Mountain National Park, for example, or hotels in the Kruger National Park, appears incontestable when nature serves the goal of wealth creation in a developing economy. Yet by that logic capital has come to serve as an apparatus of capture: capturing the moral high ground of non-racialism (or anti-racism) while maintaining the language of racial classification and environmental objectification. Wedded to the idea of permanent development, contemporary South African governance has birthed regimes of access that wield the logics of capital in favor of extraction by super-rich corporate conglomerates, while relying on endless permits and quotas to divvy up legal access to the crumbs of subsistence harvesting. In the absence of such permits Rastafarians can be criminalized for collecting medicinal plants, as can a hungry farmworker for catching a fish.<sup>5</sup> The challenge for a critical environmental humanities is this: In the face of affirmative capital, how might one begin to generate non-racial, non-elite environmental publics?

The work of decoloniality, in environmental management and conservation science, I would argue, requires the courage to unpick the ways in which the logics of coloniality and race continue to inform the idea of nature in South Africa, and as a consequence, inhibit the formation of an environmental public.

A first step—and an appropriate one in 2013, the centenary of both the Native Land Act and the Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden—is generating spaces in which to think outside of dominant logics. Where the logic of reversal predominates, the possibility of thought itself is lost, as it was in the presidency of Thabo Mbeki for whom HIV/AIDS had to be treated by reversing flows of capital and knowledge between Africa and the West.

A second step is to explore the relation between modernity, coloniality, and the notion of nature, in which nature is rendered as a collection of objects—colonization is “thing-ification,” to use Aimé Césaire's term.

These suggest that in South Africa creating an environmental public cannot be limited to changing the flows of capital around the extractable things that coloniality brought into being in its production of nature—including the nature of race.

To explore this further, I want to suggest that the Latin American debates that enable a river to be given voice in a constitutional court are

an extension of the same logic that rejects racism. My argument takes form in a critique of the ways in which modernist thought, through its logics of subjects and objects, generates the categories of race and nature simultaneously.

### Subject-Object-Race

For Frantz Fanon, the experience of being “Dirty nigger!” was that of being “an object in the midst of other objects.” For Emmanuel Levinas, the experience of being a Jewish prisoner of war in Nazi Germany was that of being “subhuman, a gang of apes . . . we were beings entrapped in their species; . . . beings without language.” Both quotations preface a book by Latin American philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres who explores the ways in which experiences of racism shaped the work of Frantz Fanon, Emmanuel Levinas, and Enrique Dussel.<sup>6</sup> Titled *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, Maldonado-Torres’s book argues that Western modernity has not yet escaped the legacy of dehumanization that shaped colonialism and racism.

The violence that is racism, in other words, finds its power in the classification of some as subjects, who have the right to speak, and others who are silent. The silenced are but objects or things in the racial imaginary in which people are reduced to the non-human; classed as a lesser species.

Maldonado-Torres’s critique of modernity has been widely hailed as a major intervention from a new Latin American voice. Its strength is its engagement with modernist thought as a practice that turns some into subjects and others into objects. Yet for all its strengths as a critique of modernist thought, the work has an important limit. That limit is this: as a philosophy of the social, his critique of subjects and objects does not extend into the realm of nature. Yet the nature-culture divide is one of the founding dualisms of modernist thought, and it is grounded in the division of subjects from objects. That the idea of nature is not only an object but the primary reference for all objects is part of the technologies of modernist thought that Maldonado-Torres describes. And, crucially, that collision of nature and object finds its outworking in racism, for race reduces people to objects via the language of biology and species. Even in first-year courses, we teach that racism naturalizes the idea of race—that it turns it into nature.

The primary technology of racist thought, goes that argument, is the language of nature. The argument is correct in many respects: go to any postcard rack in any South African shopping mall, and see for yourself the pictures of San bushmen alongside pictures of giraffes, zebras, lions, leopards, rhinos, cheetahs, and beaded Ndebele women. In the oeuvre of othering, racism is bound into exotic nature. The figure of Sarah Baartman, the San woman who was taken from Cape Town to Europe in the early 1800s to be exhibited as a freak, looms large over postcards of tourist nature.

What to make of the relationship of race and nature?

The usual line of argument here is to speak of the naturalization of a social construct.

I want to rethink that question. Instead of asking what this equation of race with nature tell us about the concept of *race* as such, we need to be asking this: *What does it say about both race and nature in the modernist imaginary?*

The recognition of the division of subject and object in matters of race is important because it makes us aware of the ways in which the mobilization of nature, as a language of objects, is part of “a master morality of dominion and control.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the recognition needs to be taken further: instead of using the idea of nature to explain the logic of race, let us extend our critique past the idea of nature to the logic of subjects and objects that embraces them both. The question then becomes one about the ways in which that division, central to modernist thought, animates the very idea of nature itself.

Such a critique is at the core of the moves in Ecuador, Bolivia, New Zealand, and Santa Monica to rewrite constitutional law to include nature as a rights holder—in other words, to do law in ways that render nature sans the logics of subject and object. In this view, the modernist version of nature is not the sole version, but one among many possible approaches to grasping the complex interrelatedness of earthforms and life forms. *Another world is possible*, is its cry. Its intervention is pinned on the rejection of the master morality that comes with the hierarchy of subjects and objects. But where Maldonado-Torres rejects the warring paradigm that renders some people as objects in order to legitimate racism and imperial projects and wars of invasion, the constitution writers in contemporary Ecuador and Bolivia have extended their critique of modernist thought to reject the subject-object divide that



legitimizes a war on nature. As such they are attempting to constitute an environmentality that draws on a different intellectual heritage—one that is deeply bound up in Amerindian thought. Its courage is in resisting the ecology of ideas that Bruno Latour writes of: “the three goddess sisters” of reason in the knowledge economy: “[technical) Efficiency, [economic] Profitability and [scientific) Objectivity.”<sup>8</sup> Besides its direct relevance to the urgent need for a framework for global governance that can challenge the assumptions of the knowledge economy, it indexes a central challenge to those of us who work at universities: Can one translate different intellectual heritages into the language of subjects and objects without betraying their core ideas?<sup>9</sup>

The conceptual cosmos of subject and object renders impossible the task of translating different forms of thought in which knowing the world means understanding the ways that creatures (including creatures, earthforms, self) perceive a field of relations that one navigates. In some versions of Amerindian thought, for example, being an effective person in the world does not come from having the knowledge to name and describe the characteristics of objects (creatures, things, landforms) but from understanding interactions both past and potential.<sup>10</sup> Nature, in that view, is not a thing that exists and whose truth can be captured and pinned on the wall like so many collections of butterflies: it is constantly interactive, and because different creatures perceive it differently, they act in it differently. The purpose of knowing the world is to be able to comprehend that nature (or the world) for a butterfly or a jaguar is different, and to understand how they will act in a particular situation requires understanding how the world comes to them in terms of their interests, priorities, and perceptual skills.<sup>11</sup> The challenge, as I see it, for Latin American decolonial dialogues on nature, is to resist the imposition of the conceptual logics of subjects and objects: a very difficult set of practices and processes, since practices and processes are as ingrained in the everyday as are the myriad practices of racism. The concomitant challenge for the post-humanities is to articulate an environmentality without recourse to subject and object.

If the experience of two decades of post-apartheid South Africa offers any lessons at all, it is of the intractability of practices. The objectification of social relations in the generating of a category of race is a habit that is hard to break, notwithstanding the moral injunction to do so. One of the hardest lessons has been that resisting racism will never

be a matter of outing the racists, or denouncing reverse racism, even when its reversals become a sort of Opposite Day. The point is not to denounce the categories or the players or even the reversals, but to seek to re-imagine the possibilities of South African political assemblies, and find ways to reconvene them. As Isabelle Stengers says so often, the task of thinking is to move beyond the scholarship of denunciations; they have done enough damage. They close down thought, instead of opening it up.<sup>12</sup> In life, unlike in English grammar, negations are not undone by double negatives.

The moves of my argument here are as careful as steps across a swollen stream: one misstep by writer or reader, and the entire argument risks being washed away. Perhaps confirming my steps thus far will help the reader across. So far I have argued that (1) race and nature are both products of the modernist imaginary, and both rely on techniques of objectification: excommunication from the ecumene of subjects to the no-man's-land of objects; (2) undoing the process of commissioning subjects and objects from the world is as hard in the Latin American decolonial experiment as it has been in the South African post-apartheid experiment. However, (3) thinking of the two regional processes in parallel is useful. My argument is that *the convergence of the subject-object divide with racism and with the dominant idea of nature allows us to think of racism and the war on nature jointly*. And (4)—here we reach the next way point—both approaches are bound up in the philosophical underpinnings of modernity.

I want to suggest that the persistence of the master moralities of subjects and objects is one of the reasons why environmentalism is so profoundly racialized in South Africa. Yet that persistence is not a matter of a willful decision: practices that produce objects are deeply ingrained. In so many meetings of publics and conservationists that were reported by researchers involved in the Contested Ecologies project at the University of Cape Town (2010–present), moments occur in which a scientist, almost inevitably white given the legacy of Bantu education, spoke or wrote either assertively or apologetically: terribly sorry, guys; the science says *x*, so you must *y*.<sup>13</sup> In those dreadful moments, almost always followed by either an awkward silence or vocal dissent, at least five things are happening. First the environment is framed as a set of things—*out there* rather than *in here*. Second those things are rendered as known almost exclusively by the experts. Third environmen-

talism is framed as compliance with science: a compliance that is enforced by the might of the state in courts of law and policing, which in the context of South Africa, enacts the relations of *baasskap*—racialized boss-ship. That almost inevitably compels the opposite of the best scientific advice: a willful noncompliance.<sup>14</sup> Fourth there is a puzzling overlap with the language of missions: stewardship; salvation, in which the environment becomes the new white man's burden; the Way and the Truth is shown by the Model. And fifth the environment competes with people for resources and protection. Alternative understandings of what we could call the “invironment”—nature that is our own flesh and bone—disappear.

Marisol de la Cadena grasps the link of race and nature with her thinking of racism as “epistemism”—the imposition of subject and object, superstition versus knowledge, nature and culture.<sup>15</sup> The idea of epistemism segues well with Aimé Césaire's acerbic comment that colonization was a process of thing-ification, for it speaks to the ways in which the logics of coloniality reframed the world as objects, rather than processes.<sup>16</sup> For Frantz Fanon, the subject-object divide spawns the master-slave relationship. In *Silent Spring* it is exactly that master morality of human subjects over natural objects that Rachel Carson took issue with. Her writing indicts the patriarchs in the American polis from the 1940s through the 1960s, whose war on pests had turned the chemical military technologies of World War I and II onto the countryside; these chemicals include dieldrin, DDT, arsenic, and any number of the toxins that South Africans like myself associate also with the apartheid state's infamous Project Coast, led by Wouter Basson, who was involved in the development of chemical and biological weapons and took on the task of producing toxins to be used against anti-apartheid activists. Where wars and their truces have been declared, it is the persistence of relational damage that takes the longest to heal. As long as the identities remain oppositionally defined, the sniping will continue.

In the past century the wars of South African fathers and forefathers, mostly white but also black, have yet to be accounted for in the devastations they wrought on relationships between grandmothers and grandfathers, between fathers and their fathers—and ourselves, the generation who carries the responsibility for the present. The twentieth century, anticipated to be the triumph of the march of human progress, has left military bootprints everywhere: the first and second Anglo-

Boer wars, World Wars I and II, the Border War, the Township war—all of which were also bound up with the Cold War and any number of *guerres* in which rural people, across Southern Africa, took such heavy casualties. A globally militarized white masculinity generated a kind of manhood based on dominion and control. My grandfather grew up riding horses and driving carts on a family farm in the Ladybrand district of the Orange Free State. He was a one-year old when the Anglo-Boer War broke out. As a teenager he lied about his age to fight for king and country in the trenches of World War I and felt the effects of mustard gas damage in the lungs for the rest of his life. How could there be a god, he asked for the next seventy years, if there could be trench warfare? My own father, raised military style, became a weekend warrior against pests and weeds on the lawn. For me escaping the master narratives of dominion and control over woman, native, other, and nature continues to be something of a lifelong project.

As I turned the pages of *Silent Spring*, I kept remembering an image of my father pumping a fine spray of pesticides and herbicides on the lawn of my childhood home. I remember him working that pump energetically, vigorously, and enthusiastically as he exterminated the pests on his corner of a godless earth—because he could. He was modern. I remember the smell of the spray, and I remember the same smell on the rolling lawns of the Humewood Golf Club, and I remember following him round the garden as he sprayed, trying to learn his comportment and ideas in order to earn his approval as one who might, like him, go on to master the wild things.

Quite by chance, while writing this, I found his old pump-action pesticide sprayer in a forgotten corner of the cupboard under the stairs in my own house. It was one of the objects I kept after he died of bone cancer; perhaps because it was a dusty copper and had that old-world gleam about it. But a part of me kept it also because, in the frenzy of sorting out his personal effects, it was an object of pride. Like his golf cart and his tool box, it was one of the objects that established him as a man of the world. With it unwanted beetles, ants, weeds, and fungi could be controlled by the head of the household. The horrors of the war, too, were tamed, put to good use, domesticated. The husbandry of the farmer's nature could be replaced by a new patriarchy in suburban nature, and with this sprayer, my father could be one of them. My mother's responsibilities for controlling nature were different: hers in-

cluded controlling the pathogens that might come into the house with black people. The gardener's dishes went in and out the back door on a tray that, to a mind steeped in the manners of whiteness, held the permanent possibility of dread disease. His dishes were always the last to be washed, in case they infected the dishwasher. The household ecology controlled race as well as nature.

*Silent Spring* does not speak to the race battles in the united states of the 1960s, but it documents the holocaust of those times that accompanied the objectification of nature in woodlands, rivers, farms, roadways, and suburbs. One of its great strengths is the ways it connects households to ecologies, and to the experience of warfare. It speaks to the waning star of husbandry—by which I mean the capacity of women and men to nurture the living through seasons and cycles; to tend the conditions that would support fertility and fecundity. Carson's many mentions of judges call for a jurisprudence that attends to the interconnectedness of living things. It gives voice to those who tended gardens and birds; those who loved the sound of crickets and beetles of bees; those whose nature was not North America's Big Five of alligator, bear, bison, wolf, and cougar, but a nature of connections between creatures small and big, human and non-human: robins, squirrels, streams, farmers, foxes, bees, fields, fishers, cows, swimmers, swallows, beetles, grandmothers, puddles, cats, and fish—a subaltern nature that would never make it in the emerging postcard industry. Such interconnections, Carson notes in several places, were mocked by the proponents of the chemical industry as the preoccupations of little old ladies. Yet the women whose concerns inspired Carson to write were not abstract thinkers whose ecology could be cleaned up in a calculus of pounds of chemicals per acre. Nor were they Beatrix Potters. They were householders; tenders of the fertilities and fecundities around them; those who had learned ways to nurture life from soils, winds, rains, and sunshine; those who understood the ties between forest and field and their own health—and who were horrified by the possibilities of a silent spring. Like Wangari Maathai's foresters without diplomas, they did not make their world via a calculus of “the gradient of the land and the entry point of the sun's rays, the depth of the seedbed, the content of the gravel” but by using what Wangari called “their woman sense” gained from the seeds they dealt with every day.<sup>17</sup> That Wangari gendered the understanding of how to help things grow is in part a reflection of her

resistance to patriarchy, but also her resistance to the kind of science that came with what Isabelle Stengers calls the “undue authority of the objectivity argument,” which is bound up in a new ecology of patriarchy, and which produces the illusion that we “deal with ultimate questions when those questions are our own fabrication.”<sup>18</sup>

A kind of science that understands nurturing is a central interest to Isabelle Stengers. “Poisoning is easy but nurturing is a craft,” she writes about the kind of science that has focused on polemic and on intellectual warfare.<sup>19</sup> A science that can speak to the ecological challenge of our times, she writes, needs to be refocused on the possibilities of nurture, on propositions that allow us to work also with what we can know and feel and experience. For Stengers attention to intellectual heritages that can grasp nurture is crucial in the context of a science that is curtailed by the interests of the knowledge economy, which names and defines productive prospects. For her the knowledge economy is unable to measure matters of nurture and well-being, which besides being of value in and of themselves, are central to the collegial courtesies that are essential for the production and affirmation of scientific knowledge. The relationalities that cannot be measured in familiar kinds of enumerations remain unnoticed, she writes, yet it is precisely those that we do need to be able to notice in order to rethink science and philosophy in ways that can respond to the crisis of nature that defines our times. It is on this point that once again contemporary Latin American decolonial debates are relevant; conventional wisdoms on development as economic growth, measured in numbers, are contested by a different rationale for development: *buen vivir*, or living well.<sup>20</sup>

Carson was deeply worried about the consequences of a new kind of science based on poisoning. When she describes the mute testimony of the contorted body of a poisoned squirrel, she asks, “By acquiescing in an act that can cause such suffering . . . who among us is not diminished as a human being?”<sup>21</sup> The shadow of the Holocaust is long, here. Her public is a public that must act; that must resist, for the sake of its own integrity.

*Silent Spring* is an essay on the possibility of a different kind of humanity and a different kind of science: one that grasps its responsibilities to well-being. The landscape of those relationships, she reminds us throughout her work, is threatened when technologies of war are turned on the environment.<sup>22</sup> Carson’s nature concerns *the intersubjec-*

*tivity of living things*. It is a critique of the limits of modernist thought that turns creatures into objects. Her science builds on interconnections, on responsiveness, and on understanding the seasonal sequences that call things into being jointly. An ecology, in a word.

## Oikos

Carson is credited with making the word “ecology” a household term. Curiously, the very word “ecology” derives from the ancient Greek *oikos*, which referred to the household of women, slaves, animals, and children whose collectivity stood outside of the *polis* which was the exclusive preserve of men in Greek democracy. The separation of *oikos* from *polis* was one of the central elements revived by modernists in the Enlightenment era who were fascinated with the Ancient Greeks.<sup>23</sup> The *polis*—ideas, battles, resources—generates nature and the household as its excluded opposite, and acquires the services of science to understand it. *Oikos*, the household domain of women, laborers, animals, and children, is wrought through practicalities of tending, whether to good or ill. It is those relationships of tending that slip out of the dialogue in which politics is about mind and about the measurable, since it is precisely the relational quality of tending—to good or ill—that is so difficult to measure.

*Oikos*, as root “household” forms not only the word “ecology” but also “economy” (*oikonomia*) and “ecumene” (*oikomene*). As I read it *Silent Spring* is a call for a resituating of politics away from the *polis*—the central, patriarchal state—to the *oikos*, the ecumene-ecology-economy around households with all their creatures. In every sense I see Carson’s success as the resituating of environmentalism out of the *polis* and into the *oikos* of the everyday: the space of household, where in ancient Greece women, slaves, and animals—gender, race, and species—found a commons. Her environmentality is in that inner household where things are grown and nurtured with the commonses of water, soil, and air that enters households and bodies; it is an environment that is not outside, in the sphere of responsibility of the state that would have been the *polis*, but inside—in our bread, and bones, and flesh. What affects the beetles affects us.

The power of *Silent Spring* is its link of creatures and toxins with households and bodies. In such an approach the environment is not an

object, like the racialized body, to be controlled or fought over in budget debates. Nature is not the responsibility of the polis. Carson's *Nature R Us* is an oikos: an ecology of interconnections, an ecumene and an economy; a shared household.

These approaches are echoed by the propositions of Bruno Latour who argues in his book *Politics of Nature* that political ecology has to let go of the idea of nature.<sup>24</sup> His target is the nature-culture divide, which he says undermines democracy because in practice it means that Parliaments deal with matters of culture and the social, while matters of nature are left to the mediations of science, outside of the realm of public accountability, on the strength of the argument that all science is neutral and divested of social interests. In contexts of climate change and the rise of "brown science," he argues, it is all the more crucial that publics are able to engage the knowledges that science generates. I agree with Latour that the division of the world into nature and culture is long past its sell-by date. The challenges of our times warrant that we "recompose modernity," to use his phrase.<sup>25</sup> I want to add to his argument, and suggest that the work needing to be done includes rethinking the categories "public" and "private." Carson's genius was to compose the world as a shared household of beings. Perhaps instead of a political ecology—which situates ecology in the polis, where state and science meet—we could be thinking of ecology *as* households. Such an approach might enable the South African debate to move past seeing environmentality as an agenda that competes with development, to one that is part of the well-being of all.

Beyond the immediate context of South Africa, responding to the reality of ours as the era of the Anthropocene demands an ecological thought that no longer propagates the fiction of an environment separate from politics; humans independent of animals; living things apart from earthforms; science from history, modernity, or coloniality. Mindful that every time I speak about environmental challenges I am confronted with the ethical responsibility to begin with my own household, I want to propose that we return to the figure of the oikos, which as I have said was for the Ancient Greeks the space for women, slaves, and animals (and we might add children and earth), outside of the polis that became parliament. Undoing mindsets deriving from patriarchy, slavery, and sexism continues to be the work of parliaments everywhere. What of the animals and the Earth?



Representing animals and Earth in parliaments is the move that has been made—or begun—in the Rights of Nature movements. That work seems to me vitally important. Yet I am equally uneasy with the assumption that inclusion in the polis is the sum of what is needed, because it seems to me that the risk of creating ever more stakeholders in an expanded polis, important as that is, is that of handing over ever greater tracts of responsibility to central governments. The disempowerment of people, in the ordinary and the everyday and in their households, is the risk. I want to suggest that an environmentalism that can undo the damage done to the planet by the polis—the space of a particular kind of patriarchal rationality, away from the messy relationalities that make up life—is one that resituates the household in its thinking. The household, the *oikos*, is not apart from the polis: it is the space that is all of us: the commonses of ocean, air, land, heat that encompass all parliaments. It is not simply a consumer, but a coproducer. And it is at the level of the household that environmental vulnerability is felt most keenly.

Like any household the *oikos* is not idyllic (and neither is the polis). Its reality is relations of power, but also relations of care; it can be a destructive and dysfunctional space, and the networks of life that it tends can be as pathological as they can be life giving. Households are temporal spaces in which relations of well-being between creatures and forms matter over timeframes that far exceed the electoral cycles that bedevil environmental decision making in the polis. My growing conviction is that we can recover and transform the notion of the *oikos*: in which relationships of nurture, tending, and mutual vulnerability offer the logics that replace logics of capital gain, compliance, and centralized control. At issue is the reinstatement of tending growth; an ethics of care. Enabling publics to assemble around the life giving is what is at issue; it is that which restores senses of worth, dignity, desire, and future. It resituates political action in the everyday questions of how to nurture future well-being: how to dispose of glass and paper, what building materials to use, how each of those decisions affects other possible decisions. The household of which I speak, in other words, is not the house on an erf; it is the assemblage of relations that support life and growth.

A revolutionary environmentality that can change public decision making, I want to suggest, does not absorb the *oikos* into the polis; it resituates action in the *oikos* of ecology, economy, and *ecumene*. To contend with Bruno Latour's argument, it is not simply that environ-

mental politics should let go of nature; it is that environmental politics should rethink both the idea of nature and the faith it places in centralized political institutions. Putting the rights of nature into parliaments, courts, and city councils is one strategy. But if its environmentality is based solely on law, compliance, and control, the risk is that it engenders a spiral of violence in which there will be no winners. Environmentality in South Africa has to begin with the ecologies of households—what households can contribute, what people can grow, how relations of tending and nurture and well-being might be restored.

Fifty years after *Silent Spring*, the idea is everywhere: ours is the era of the Anthropocene. The concept proposes that human impact on the planet in a few decades is now on the scale of a geological era. Globally the pressing question is this: What kind of philosophy will nurture life beyond the Anthropocene?

I have argued that the kind of environmentalism that centers on the polis—on the state and its responsibilities—derives from an understanding of nature as being out there, as object. But I have also sought to argue the question a different way, too: if we recognize the idea of objects in both race and nature, we can begin to unpack the master morality of a humanity that has command or stewardship over nature. To read *Silent Spring* fifty-plus years on is to visit the house of a writer who resisted the idea that the mandate of science was mastery over nature, and who refused to accept that training the sciences of two World Wars on nature was an improvement of humanity. Her ecology is an invitation to enter into the hospitality of the relationships that give life.

When I embarked on the long journey of unmaking my received world as a white South African teenage fundamentalist, the heady days of student feminist and anti-apartheid activism took me to a place where a carved Malawian chair became part of my household. Etched into the long ebony backrest is a woman-becoming-bird who, with a man, is holding a gourd from which sprouts a live plant. Two fish and the bird, whose well-being is entangled with the well-being of its non-human presences, move around the household. The image resonates with the ideas of the multiply awarded farmer Zephaniah Phiri, a Malawian who has farmed for decades in an oasis that he has nurtured into existence in a dry area of southern Zimbabwe. Taught with laughter and a limp that comes from having survived four years in British leg irons, his “Phiri

ecology” rests on “*the marriage of water and soil*.”<sup>26</sup> On his farm amid the ongoing economic and political crisis of Zimbabwe, ecology is not a matter of food webs, but an ecumene, the setting together of creatures and propensities. Tending here includes culling pests and welcoming useful innovations; Phiri’s work is not a retreaded tire of tradition, but a suite of cocreated practices, constantly in the making, that experiment with techniques of coexistence. The household economy is not dependent on the state’s oikonomia. It is neither a purely consumptive space nor a purely productive space: the emphasis is on generating a reproductive space, which places value on action that responds to propensities of water, gravel, soil, and donkeys. In a dry corner of Zimbabwe on the underside of modernity, Phiri’s springs not only speak, but they also marry. Rachel Carson would have been inspired.

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#### NOTES

1. “Ecuador: 2008 Constitution in English,” Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Center for Latin American Studies, and Georgetown University website, <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.

2. “Whanganui Iwi and The Crown: Tūtohu Whakatupua, 30 August 2012,” <http://nz01.terabyte.co.nz/ots/DocumentLibraryWhanganuiRiverAgreement.pdf>; “Law of Mother Earth: The Rights of Our Planet: A Vision from Bolivia,” Article 3 (Mother Earth) reads as follows: “Mother Earth is a dynamic living system comprising an indivisible community of all living systems and living organisms, interrelated, interdependent and complementary, which share a common destiny” (See World Future Fund website, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Projects/Indicators/motherearthbolivia.html>). The Spanish original, “Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra: Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia,” may be found at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/44900268/Ley-de-Derechos-de-la-Madre-Tierra-Estado-Plurinacional-de-Bolivia>. See “An Ordinance of the City Council of the City of Santa Monica: Establishing Sustainability Rights,” April 9, 2013, City of Santa Monica website, [http://www.smgov.net/departments/council/agendas/2013/20130409/s20130409\\_07a1.htm](http://www.smgov.net/departments/council/agendas/2013/20130409/s20130409_07a1.htm). Paragraph 4.75.040 asserts, “Natural communities and ecosystems possess fundamental and inalienable rights to exist and flourish in the City of Santa Monica. To effectuate those rights on behalf of the environment, residents of the City may bring actions to protect these natural communities and ecosystems, defined as: groundwater aquifers, atmospheric systems, marine waters, and native species within the boundaries of the City.”

3. This was questioned in the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee meeting of November 13, 2012. See “Stock Recovery Strategy for Hake, Abalone, West Coast Rock Lobster, South Coast Rock Lobster,” November 13, 2012, Parliamentary Monitoring Group website, <http://www.pmg.org.za/report/20121113-continuation-briefing-department-agriculture-forestry-and-fisheries-d>.

4. Zipho Xego, “Brief Overview of Tralso’s Engagement with the Dwesa-Cwebe Community” (paper presented at the Land Divided Conference, Cape Town, March 2013), <http://www.landdivided2013.org.za/sites/default/files/The%20involvement%20of%20TRALSO%20in%20dwesa-cwebe%20-%20Zipho%20Xego.pdf>; Jacqueline Sunde, personal communication, May 2013.

5. See Lennox Olivier, “Rastafari Bushdoctors and the Challenges of Transforming Nature Conservation in the Boland Area (M.Phil. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2011); and Marieke Norton, field research report, 2012.

6. Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

7. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War*, 2.

8. Bruno Latour, “The Recall of Modernity: Anthropological Approaches,” *Cultural Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (2007): 11–30, quotation on 19.

9. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation,” *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 3–22.

10. Lesley Green and David Green, *Knowing the Day, Knowing the World: Engaging Amerindian Thought in Public Archaeology* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

11. There are considerable overlaps between what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls

Amerindian perspectivism with what speculative philosophers of science like Isabelle Stengers speak of as “the event” in which scientific experiment encounters that which it defines as an object. It would be an error to claim that posthumanism perfectly matches Amerindian thought. The relevant point is that the logics of science (under the star of the knowledge economy, or affirmative capital) generate particular objects and interests that become visible in relation to available technologies, priorities and thematic interests. See Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

12. Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

13. Lesley Green, ed., *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013).

14. Oliver Schultz, “Belonging on the West Coast: An Ethnography of St Helena Bay in the Context of Marine Resource Scarcity” (MA thesis, University of Cape Town, 2010).

15. Marisol de la Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond ‘Politics,’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (May 2010): 334–70.

16. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

17. Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 135–36.

18. Isabelle Stengers, “Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism,” *Subjectivity* 22 (May 2008): 38–59, quotations on 47, 50.

19. Stengers, “Experimenting with Refrains,” 38.

20. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Economic Development and Cosmopolitical Re-involvement: From Necessity to Sufficiency,” in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 28–41.

21. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 100.

22. Carson’s book on the oceans, *The Sea around Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), opens with the military need for a mapping of the ocean during World War II.

23. Agamben’s argument begins with the separation of oikos (natural life) from polis, but my view is different from his: if the polis performatively enacts its opposite, re-defining the polis is not about giving back oikos to polis, nor extending polis to include oikos, since the intellectual and activist task is to reimagine the possibilities for the assemblage in different terms. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

24. Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

25. Latour, “The Recall of Modernity.”

26. Christopher Mabeza, “Metaphors for Climate Adaptation from Zimbabwe: Zephaniah Phiri Maseko and the Marriage of Water and Soil,” in *Contested Ecologies: Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*, ed. Lesley Green (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 126–37.