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Politics of Ecological Nostalgia

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Abstract

With the rush of technological, cultural, and environmental change, the world is awash in nostalgia for what has vanished or is threatened with disappearance. Nostalgia as a concept is pervasive, but is often trivialized as sentimental, fetishizing the ghostly simulacra of lost worlds and experiences that may not have been as people imagine. Ecological nostalgia, or the homesick yearning for experiences of nature, species, and past environments, is becoming an increasingly important part of the environmental imagination. Is *ecological* nostalgia different from run-of-the-mill nostalgia? Can its restorative and reflective elements inspire action and thought? What are its promises and pitfalls as a political passion? This paper is a preliminary examination of the idea of ecological nostalgia that follows a loose argument but is primarily impressionistic and associative (much like nostalgia itself). Drawing principally on the work of Simon Schama, Raymond Williams, Svetlana Boym, Glenn Albrecht, and Karen Litfin, it suggests connections between ecological nostalgia and childhood, species loss, dam removal, and gentrification. It argues that as ecological nostalgia becomes a widespread counterpoint to 21st century change, it should be given greater critical attention by environmental political theorists looking to understand the productive potential of an overlooked and oft-derided emotional and cultural construct.

Are we now becoming inured to a new narrative of nature, in which ecosystem-level change in accelerated time scales is part of the background of everyday life? Children who are growing up watching glaciers retreat and sea ice vanishing, villages sinking, tundra wildfires raging and once-common trees disappearing — will they learn to regard constant disappearance as the ordinary way of the world? I hope it is not so.
– Helen MacDonald

Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men's nostalgia offends.
– Raymond Williams

I remember when I used to be into nostalgia.
– Demetri Martin

Introduction

So much of modern life fetishizes the new and what it promises for the future. From techno-capitalism's creative destruction, to art, pop culture, and even trends in the Academy, the gaze seems relentlessly forward-looking. Ravenous appetites – material and intellectual – crave the satisfaction of the next desire, commodity, innovation, or idea. So much is passed off, left behind, and ignored in the pursuit of the novel and the fresh. The fetishization of the new has been described by Mark Lilla (2016) as "prostalgia," or an obsession with what's to come based almost entirely on fantasy (as opposed to anything "real"). There is even a nostalgia for futures that never occurred. We were promised a world of abundant leisure where machines did all the drudgery. Or jetpacks! The future, it seems, is never what it used to be.

Fascination with the new has profound consequences for individuals, communities, and environments alike. When we turn our gaze backward, toward history and past ecologies that have been deeply transformed by climate change, species loss, and resource exploitation, it is like we are in the position of Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" who hurtles toward the future, back turned, only glimpsing the catastrophes of the past as wreckage piles up at its feet.[i] Put this way, nostalgia under such circumstances is absurd, even cruel. Who wants to revisit such wreckage? What can it do for us if we cannot turn around and change course? Sticking with Benjamin's metaphor, what would the mood and cast of mind of *ecological* nostalgia be?

Would it be different? Should it be encouraged? Might it have productive qualities for political thinking and motivate strategies for ecological preservation and restoration?

Though seemingly distinct, prostalgia is directly related to nostalgia. The waves of change prostalgia dreams of are pulled back by nostalgia and a longing for what has vanished and disappeared. The more we wish for the new, and accept disruption as a force beyond our control, the more we produce nostalgia. Both may be said to traffic in fantasy and imagination, qualities that have both strengths and drawbacks for environmental political theorists. When considering implications for green politics, what can we make of the phenomenon of *ecological* nostalgia? Is the nostalgic yearning for ecological pasts subject to the same derision that nostalgia receives as a sad, wistful emotion predicated on incomplete truths? Or can the modifier ecological to nostalgia turn it into a different sort of retrospection, one that isn't just about a vaporous re-living of lost experiences but has political potential for green thought and praxis? If so, what could this look like? What are its productive capacities and what are its pitfalls? Can it provide a critical distance that informs the present or is too saturated with romanticism and idealized pasts? Can it aid what Schlosberg calls a "politics of sight" and allow us to see, and maybe more importantly feel, what otherwise wouldn't register clearly?[ii] Can the homesickness that accompanies nostalgia encourage commitments to acts of restoration, repair, and care for the world, for both individuals and collectivities alike? My hunch in pursuing these questions is that ecological nostalgia has a different tone and register than the nostalgia an individual may feel, or a society that looks fondly back to its "golden ages." By identifying what we long for through nostalgia – heathier environments, robust ecosystems, flourishing communities – we can potentially find a way to envision that which deserves protection and restoration.

Nostalgia's "fundamental ambivalence… the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial," as Svetlana Boym (2001) writes, should make it attractive to environmental political theorists.[iii] Its paradoxes serve thinking. But though seductive to a subject captivated by its reverie, nostalgia is ultimately a troubled emotion with a problematic relationship to politics. *Ecological* nostalgia also has a perplexing and perilous relation to politics due to selective recall, the avoidance of painful history, and even fascism. But I contend that its emphasis on ecological pasts call attention to harmful environmental change in a way that can positively impact political thought and praxis. Ecological nostalgia is a sentiment that is a remarkably common response to ecological and social disruption. That fact alone makes it worthy of investigation for green theorists. But there is more to pursue, namely a source of action and political engagement rooted in a felt sense of loss and rupture. Ecological nostalgia might be able to counteract apathy and indifference. The remembrance of past ecologies – both as a matter of personal experience and as epistemic knowledge – may help to restore, repair, and revivify connections to place, webs of life, and the thriving of healthy environments through an affirmative green politics. By working on both an affective and cognitive level, ecological nostalgia has unique qualities as a political emotion. Ecological nostalgia takes us to the past, but unlike conventional nostalgia, need not remain there.

Building off Svetlana Boym's ideas of *restorative* and *reflective* nostalgia and Glenn Albrecht's neologism *solastalgia*, this paper explores how ecological nostalgia provides motivation to restore and preserve degraded and threatened habitats, as well afford opportunities for contemplation, thereby stimulating the political, ethical, and environmental imagination. What follows is not a tightly constructed argument. Rather, like nostalgia itself, the paper is impressionistic, elliptical, and associative. I engage with Glenn Albrecht, Simon Schama,

Kirkpatrick Sale, Svetlana Boym, Karen Litfin, and Raymond Williams to explore in broad outline whether ecological nostalgia has relevance to environmental political theorists. The paper unfolds as follows: Part I looks at the concepts of nostalgia and ecological nostalgia. Part II provides critical and affirmative criteria to evaluate ecological nostalgia as a political concept. Part III looks at examples of ecological nostalgia that apply to childhood, species loss, dam removal, and the relationship between the city and the country.

Part I: Nostalgia and Ecological Nostalgia

Nostalgia

Investigating historical sources of alienation and separation from nature are instructive, even if there are no easy – or even possible – ways to repair lost worlds. Historical reflection helps us understand past environments and social contexts and their connection to the present. As William Faulker insists, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." John Barry (2014) in the Foreword to *Engaging Nature: Environmentalism and the Political Theory Canon*, writes of "the importance of having a historical sensibility when contemplating our present situation and possible future trajectories… (R)e-reading the canon is rather like looking back in the rear-view mirror as a sensible part of looking ahead, helping us plan, make decisions, and inform our judgment on specific courses of action."[iv] I wish to suggest that nostalgia, and ecological nostalgia, is a mode of historical sensibility worthy of such critical attention.

Herman Ebbinghaus, the pioneer of the empirical study of memory, says that everything in our mental world is a memory.[v] Nostalgia is a quality of memory, at once individual and social, insightful and misleading. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "nostalgia" as "1)

Acute longing for familiar surroundings; severe homesickness. 2) Regret or sentimental longing for the conditions of a period (usually recent) past; regretful or wistful memory or imagining an earlier time." *Nostos* means "return to home or native land," and *algia* means "pain or sickness." The writer Charles D'Ambrosio (2014) defines nostalgia as "where loss finds rest."[vi] In fact, nostalgia was once seen as a medical condition. In the 17th century, nostalgia was treated by opium, leeches, and trips to the Swiss Alps.[vii] Svetlana Boym (2001) in *The Future of Nostalgia* writes that the "home" invoked by nostalgia no longer exists, if it ever *really* existed. It is a "sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship."[viii] Nostalgia needs the passage of time and the reflective distance that is only afforded by looking back on different stages of life. The mixture of pleasure and pain, fondness and sorrow, make nostalgia a powerful feature of memory. The emotions evoked by nostalgic turns of reminiscence are often associated with yearning for innocent days gone by. They can be warm and comforting, but also an escape from living vibrantly in the present, a retreat from life. Now nostalgia is more often treated with ironic dismissal. There remains the perception that nostalgia is something unhealthy.

Nostalgia as a concept saturates literature, film, music, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, but not as much in political theory or environmental political theory. Why is this so? Perhaps it's because it doesn't appear to be a serious concept worthy of investigation, like democracy, freedom, equality, rights, responsibility, etc. Nostalgia plays on turbulently subjective feelings of both happiness and sadness, making it a style of retrospection that is unreliable, inaccurate, and even dangerous in its tendency to selectively romanticize past experiences while ignoring wider political contexts of power and social injustice. Nostalgia is only mentioned twice in the *Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (2016).

Steven Vogel critiques Bill McKibben's reverence for a familiar, mythic "Nature" that has come to an end, as nostalgic.[ix] Giovanna Di Chiro questions the nostalgic yearning by some greens for an essentialist environmentalism that is not disturbed by contemporary critiques of "nature" and "culture."

And yet nostalgia is a feeling, a "structure of feeling" as Raymond Williams (1973) might say, that is surprisingly, and I'd argue, increasingly relevant to the environmental imagination. And it is certainly better than collective amnesia or the acceptance of environmental degradation as an inexorable byproduct of "progress." George Monbiot (2014) refers to this longing for what was lost as "ecological boredom."[x] The Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht (2006) uses a more emotionally powerful term. He coined the phrase *solastalgia* to describe the "pain or discomfort caused by the present state of one's home environment." Albrecht is on to something very important, and I want to work with and build on this concept of emotional distress that I fear will become increasingly environmental in character considering what's already happening regarding climate change, mass species extinctions, and habitat transformation. The experience of change and degradation can be dizzying and painful. Yet I'm concerned that *solastalgia* can succumb to what Donna Haraway (2016) calls "sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference." Great pain can lead to numbness and a shutting from the world. Albrecht's concept of homesickness is exceptionally elastic, as "home" can be constructed by agents in any number of ways. Ecological nostalgia is concerned with ecological change and, more specifically comparative in nature: a retrospection about past environments, shifting baselines, and making sense of "new normals." I contend that ecological nostalgia is a way of looking backwards, therefore, that is *not just about the past*. Ecological nostalgia can also help us make sense of the present by tracking what is missing, hidden, or underground. It is

an invitation to remember what has been forgotten, and to not mistake present ecological conditions as inevitable or something that "ought to be."

Between the Koreas

I first started thinking about *ecological* nostalgia by reflecting on a place I've never been: the DMZ between North and South Korea. In 1953, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) was created as a military buffer and partition between North and South Korea. It is a 2.4-mile-wide strip that runs across the entire Korean peninsula. Due to nearly sixty years of conflict, relatively little human activity has "ironically transformed the DMZ into a wild natural sanctuary for native plants and animals."[xi] Environmental degradation in communist North Korea and rapid industrialization in the South has made the relatively wild character of the DMZ stand out even more. After the "Sunshine Policy" of 2000, a new openness occurred between the North and South Korean governments, allowing for the temporary reunification of families, some tourism, and limited economic development. It also created the opportunity for many South Koreans to visit the DMZ for the first time, enabling, for some, glimpses into a recent ecological past.

Covered by barbed wire on all sides and dotted with land mines, the DMZ "now supports one of the last vestiges of Korea's natural heritage, providing important sanctuary for wildlife including Chinese egret, black bear, musk deer, mountain goat, and many endangered and practically extirpated species such as the migratory black-faced spoonbill, white-napped crane, red-crowned crane, leopard cat, and perhaps even the Korean tiger."[xii] The red-crowned crane, long a symbol of peace in East Asia and a prominent figure on scrolls and paintings, is said to land so lightly that it does not trigger land mines even if it lands on one. Such a powerful metaphor for peace! Nostalgia for a wild and lost Korea appears to be sparking a nostalgic

environmental imagination. For some Koreans, the drive to reconnect to the "old" Korea through protection of the DMZ resonates strongly.

After this transitory thaw in relations, hope has risen in some Korean and transnational environmental circles for the protection of the DMZ as a nature reserve and as a peaceful symbol of unity between the Korean peoples through recognition of a shared ecology. While a plan to turn the DMZ into an international peace park to foster peace and integrate the two Koreas has gained some traction and media attention, it is still at an early stage and, obviously, remains hostage to the larger military and political conflict between not just North and South Korea, but regional powers like China, Japan, and the United States. But domestic and global civil society organizations, like the DMZ Forum, the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM), and the International Crane Foundation, have emerged in recent years to work toward this innovative proposal,.[xiii]

What is appealing about these cases of nostalgia in Korea is this desire to reconnect to an ecological identity that has been noticeably changed by military conflict, industrial pollution, and habitat transformation in *living memory*. Wildness in this sense is expressed as preserving the recent ecological memory of a Korea transformed in the space of roughly two or three generations. To many Koreans, the ecological baseline of what is a "new normal" has noticeably shifted in their lifetimes. I suspect this is a global phenomenon. Particularly so for locales that have undergone rapid change due to development and the forces of globalization. This idea of a rapid change of "ecological baselines" – what people are used to and environmental transformation they are willing to tolerate – is in constant tension with the nostalgic remembrance of an ecological past.

Nostalgia in Seattle

As I further engaged in preparation for this project, I started to notice the theme of nostalgia seemingly *everywhere* – in art, music, historic preservation, commercial products, technology, pop culture. Vinyl records, craft cocktails, old video games, old tools, steampunk fashion all conjure nostalgic feelings. My college reunion in Minnesota was described as packed full of "nostalgia and fun." Even my horoscope, which is something I'm embarrassed to admit I sometimes check, promises that "nostalgic retrospection will thrive in the next five months." We'll see if this turns out to be a prophecy.

With the rise in nostalgia as a cultural currency, there is widespread revulsion against it. Living in a rapidly changing city like Seattle, the fault line of gentrification is the major fracture zone of local politics. On some level, one wouldn't think that collective nostalgia would run that deep, as Seattle is a young city that has long experienced booms and busts and changing demographics. But the present boom is changing the city profoundly. Rising costs and development are pushing out artists and historic communities of color. Major fights occur regarding preserving certain buildings or a neighborhood's character. The old viaduct on the Puget Sound side of downtown, which is being razed so that a giant tunnel can be built – a safer, and more efficient way to move cars, apparently – was "re-imagined" in a city referendum to turn part of the elevated highway into a park (like the High Line in NYC). It didn't pass, and *The Stranger*, one of the town's progressive weeklies, usually one to support public park projects and green spaces, condemned the Viaduct Park plan as a product of "fantastical nostalgia."[xiv] Reacting against nostalgic elements in music culture, the 40th anniversary of punk rock (dated from the rise of the Sex Pistols in 1976) found old punks in London burning memorabilia, in the

style of Metzger's auto-destructive art, because punk, as an "authentic" art, "isn't supposed to traffic in nostalgia."

Yet nostalgia is also in the eye of the beholder and depends on its evocative purpose. A nostalgic environmental art project that received critical acclaim titled "Illuminated Ghosts" projected images of 300-foot-tall old growth trees along the industrial Duwamish River in South Seattle, "to remind us of what once was and could be again someday."[xv] A book titled *Ghosts of Seattle Past: An Anthology of Lost Places* is striking a nerve in cultural circles, even if, as one commenter put it, "Seattle nostalgia exhausts you." A woman in the South Sound made news when she "nostalgically" fought to save trees near I-5 that were planted in memory of fallen soldiers in WWI, an area currently under heavy pressure from sprawl. Attention is given to ruins as something that can be instructive regarding the failure of infrastructure and what it can teach us about development and planning. J.B. Jackson (1980) makes this case in his book *The Necessity For Ruins*. There is even a sub-culture of those who seek out "ruin porn," buildings in such decay that they are a kind of attraction.[xvi] If you look, you'll see countless performances of nostalgia that call attention to loss and disappearance.

Ecological Nostalgia

How can we make sense of, and begin to evaluate, then, *ecological* nostalgia? There are several spectrums worth looking at: Direct experience v. intellectual knowledge, individual memories v. collective stories, and anthropocentric v. ecocentric points of view. We might also question if there are differences between *environmental* and *ecological* nostalgia, with the former concerned with built environments and social history, and the latter more attuned to ecosystems and habitat for non-human nature.

Ecological nostalgia is first a quality of *environmental* memory. Journalist and indigenous rights activist Mark Dowie notes that in the fight for indigenous rights, memory is the most important intellectual resource.[xvii] In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama (1996) presses the point that any concept of landscape is first the product of mind and memory. "Landscape" contains a tremendous amount of human history.[xviii]

But what kind of memory is this? And can memory be trusted? Surely memory is one of the most unreliable of human faculties. Jane Austen claimed that memory is incomprehensible.[xix] Plato likens mind and memory to birds in an aviary – thoughts and sentiments that are difficult to catch and require constant re-interpretation.[xx] Schama's perspective is that memory, especially when applied to landscapes and nature, is part history and part myth. Nostalgia about anything, whether individual or collective, needs to traffic in some sort of myth-making. It may seem that ancient forest, river, or mountain myths are anachronistic ways of understanding natural phenomenon. Schama insists that these myths are alive if we know where to look, even in our disenchanted age.[xxi] The question becomes, *how much and in what doses?*[xxii] Notwithstanding the "usual eviscerations of Western empirical analysis," Schama insists that we should take myth seriously in any investigation of memory and nature. Schama is persuasive on this point, and we might also ask of any kind of ecological nostalgia: *How much and in what doses*? We might also ask what kind, and what does it say about politics?

The connection between psychological dislocation and environmental harm with a desire for solace is at the heart of Glenn Albrecht's neologism of *solastalgia*. As he points out,

> The factors that cause solastalgia can be both natural and artificial. Natural disasters such as drought, fire and flood can be a cause of *solastalgia*. Human-induced change such as war, terrorism, land clearing, climate change, mining, rapid institutional change and the gentrification of older parts of cities can also be causal agents. The concept of *solastalgia*

> has relevance wherever there is the direct experience of negative transformation or desolation of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity, belonging and control."[xxiii]

As Helen MacDonald (2015) writes, this experience is exacerbated by our knowledge: "Increasingly, knowing your surroundings, recognizing the species of animals and plants around you, means opening yourself to constant grief."[xxiv] Yet *solastalgia* also implies the active seeking solace in the face of grief. The connection to nature is profound here, as people, especially greens, see immersion in the natural environment as a kind of solace, a retreat from troubles and the stresses of life. Wendell Berry (1968) captures this sentiment well when he writes, "I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax themselves with the forethought of grief. For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free."[xxv]

Solastalgia and ecological nostalgia are clearly linked, but I wonder if they have slightly different capacities. *Solastalgia* is more closely related to psychological and socio-psychological attributes of experience, whereas ecological nostalgia has more of a focus on ecosystems and ecological relationships. If *solastalgia* has more of an association with pain and the desire for solace, ecological nostalgia is more likely to be epistemic, more about accounting for ecological change and understanding the social, political, and historical drivers of that change. Taken together, solastalgia and ecological nostalgia can be a powerful source of motivation.

Like *solastalgia*, ecological nostalgia is strongly linked to subjectivity. It is fed by recollection of past experiences of/in environments. Ecological nostalgia is most powerful when these experiences connect to emotional states that give meaning to one's life. Such personal reflection counter-acts trends toward technologically-mediated and curated experiences of the environment, what Schama calls the "mindless race toward a machine-driven universe."[xxvi] Indeed, many people now consume "the environment" through images, whether aesthetically

pleasing or ugly and devastating. The cavalcade of images can be profound, impactful, and arresting, but also abstract and temporary in their effects. As Helen MacDonald worries, "But perhaps when all the ash trees are gone and the landscape has become flatter and simpler and smaller, someone not yet born will tap on a screen, call up images and wonder at the lost glory of these exquisite, feathered trees." How long will this wonder last for someone who knows but doesn't viscerally feel the grief of this loss? Ecological nostalgia, I suspect, taps into something deeper and more affective on a psychic and somatic level. The feeling of something affects us in different ways than intellectual knowing. Ecological nostalgia brings together the intellectual and the affective.

Pursuing the point between direct experience and technological mediation further, Karen Litfin writes in *Ecovillages: Lessons for Sustainable Community* (2014) that we *know* that the climate is changing, but most of us do little about it because we don't *feel* its gravity and impact. At root, she argues, this "is a problem of apathy, which means literally a failure to feel. When we repress anguish our hearts are dead, which subverts effective action."[xxvii] Ecological nostalgia is a counter to apathy because it is strongly about activating reflective feelings and emotional attachments in people. It is about affection. The 2016 Yale Climate Opinion study bears Litfin's idea out. People overwhelmingly think that climate change is real and will cause damage to future generations of human and non-human life, yet also think it doesn't really affect them personally.[xxviii] This is because there is a difference between knowing something abstractly and knowing something intimately as a matter of experience. The connection of the individual to large-scale environmental problems is what Litfin (2016) calls person-planet politics. This perspective informs her teaching in the classroom. She frequently uses contemplative practices to foster self-awareness and integrative learning when it comes to studying climate change, bio-

depletion, and other topics in global environmental politics, asking the question, "Who am I in a changing climate?" Ecological nostalgia not only serves to remind us of the pain of witnessing loss and degradation, it carries with it seeds of motivation to respond and remedy because of its work on our emotional memory. Ecological nostalgia is one way of responding to the question, who am I in relation to a changing climate?

There is also an element of prudence to remembering past environments. During the Tohoku earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan in 2011 old markers, hundreds of years old, were discovered in the wake of the tsunami's transformation of the coastline. They strongly warned of building in flood prone areas but were long forgotten, an outcome of cultural amnesia and the digestion of time. Had locals remembered, and heeded the warnings, some of the tsunami damage might have been mitigated.

Ecological nostalgia can lead to what I'll call pre-emptive nostalgia. With increased sensitivity to ecological change and the inevitable desire to extrapolate from current trends the contours of future worlds, ecological nostalgia for many greens has a pre-emptive component – the desire to attach to and remember something *before* its gone. The "history of the future" can yield feelings of loss and homesickness for a world that is not lost (at least not yet). In pre-emptive nostalgia, the sense of regret has active power, for there is at least the possibility of writing a different story by doing something *now*. Environmental activists in the USA, for instance, have good reason to be concerned about the Trumpian "deconstruction of the administrative state" as it impacts the environment. From the potential gutting of the Endangered Species Act and the EPA, to the dismantling of climate change policies, to the open season for resource extraction on public land, it is hard not to see environmental harms accelerating, and it is quite natural to feel anxieties of pre-emptive nostalgia. To be effective,

pre-emptive ecological nostalgia needs to avoid the paralyzing fear of catastrophe and minimize idle daydreaming. It needs to be focused on the political. Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan, of course, also traffics in nostalgia (and propaganda).

But Trump manipulates such emotions for cynical political purposes and is in no way ecological. This is not to say that ecological nostalgia can't be used in the service of ideology or power. So the question becomes, how is ecological nostalgia deployed? Whose nostalgia is recognized? Who speaks for nostalgia? Under what conditions and for what purposes? These questions bring us more directly to political considerations.

Part II: Politicizing Ecological Nostalgia

Critiques of nostalgia as a political emotion

In his book *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics*, political theorist PJ Brendese investigates how political power shapes memory, agency, and recognition.[xxix] He is inspired by Orwell's observation that those who control the past control the future, and that those who control the present control the past. Brendese's framework has resonance with the politics of ecological nostalgia. It is commonly said that "winners" control historical narratives of place. Indigenous experiences everywhere are a testament of the power of a dominant culture to erase and render invisible. Mark Spence's *Dispossessing the Wilderness* (2000) demonstrates how the history of American national parks and wilderness areas were often accompanied by forcible eviction of indigenous peoples.[xxx] Power and memory are visible in obvious forms of colonization, both material and cognitive, but also through systems of discourse and knowledge, as "older" ways of knowing land and place are lumped into the general category of TEK –

traditional ecological knowledge. Jack Nisbet (2016) recalls the story of interviewing Ann McCrae, a Coeur d'Alene Indian, about the names of places in the Inland Northwest where her family used to spend their summers digging roots, catching fish, and playing games. In trying to locate where an earthquake existed in 1872, the two reviewed Salish names for people and places. But eventually they came to an impasse, with Ann remarking, "Maybe the words are old and those places are under water now."[xxxi] The sense of resignation is palpable.

Nostalgia as an emotion is associated with conservative values. At their best, conservative environmental values promote attention to the past, the linking of generations, and wise, prudent counsel about social and political change. At its worst, conservative environmental values mask injustice with fantasy, hostile to progressive transformation as a stubborn matter of principle, and marked by refuge in dead dogmas. Conservative nostalgia provides an escapist ride through "glory days" with selective impulse to idealize and romanticize. As comedian John Stewart puts it, such nostalgia is for "old men who are sad." Nostalgia of this type kindles a reverse-utopianism that is a reaction to globalization and the seemingly inexorable march of technologically-mediated virtual realities.

Indeed, conservative nostalgia suspiciously warps history by ignoring what is uncomfortable. Charles Maier describes this sort of nostalgia as "history without guilt… something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame."[xxxii] For Svetlana Boym, "nostalgia in this sense is an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure."[xxxiii] This sort of nostalgia marginalizes the marginalized and sweeps away the unpleasant. Ecological nostalgia, to be sure, can surely be weaponized in this way in the service of an oppressive power.

Ecological nostalgia can also fall prey to quaint notions of the past. David Schlosberg (2016) critiques "nostalgic" ecological restoration projects based on wilderness values, nature reserves, or iconic places as passé. He writes, "Past environments can no longer function in newly climate-changed space."[xxxiv] The implication raises serious questions about using empirical knowledge as a baseline for management, preservation, and restoration. To Schlosberg, the attempt to preserve ecological conditions of the past prevents us from helping ecosystems function more resiliently in the face of turbulent Anthropocene changes.[xxxv] This is another way of saying that ecological nostalgia is unrealistic and has little to offer in terms of practical strategies to confront ecological change. Rewilding and ecological restoration doesn't have to be hitched to a static version of the past, as I'll argue later, but Schlosberg's point here is well taken.

Ecological nostalgia can also invoke other dark forces, such as virulent forms of nativism and nationalism that rely on ugly identity politics about who belongs and who doesn't in a political community. The Nazi ideology of *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) is an obvious example. There are no doubt many others. Svetlana Boym notes that efforts to restore cultural or national conditions from the past have often been accompanied by great violence.[xxxvi] To Marx, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living… (and in) precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service."[xxxvii] A nostalgic political ecology can be accompanied, especially through the exploitation of major social and environmental disruption, by deeply fascistic elements.

In a similar vein, Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* writes that the "good old days" are often a "stick used to beat the present."[xxxviii] Nostalgia for the past in this sense is

an instrument of power, a conservative prejudice against change and is often allied with ossified tradition, dogma, and the belief that Eden or a Golden Age exists in some mythic upstream. The problem with this, *inter alia*, is that the conception of history and nature is static and hitched to an imaginary time of innocence and virtue. Williams writes perceptively that often this desire for fixity can be selective and written anew by history's winners. Fixity is a corollary to periods of intense change, and signals shifts in the bases of social power. Williams points out that when property rights in England were under pressure of enclosures and the loss of the commons, the *idea* of property rights became sacrosanct for those who'd recently come into new wealth and property.[xxxix] The real challenge, he urges then, is to strenuously endeavor to see what is really going on in society and what change *is actually taking* place. For Kirpatrick Sale in *Dwellers in the Land* (2000), the project of understanding and caring for place should avoid the "nostalgic and the utopian" if it wishes to be realistic and practical.[xl] I'd say that it is not so much that nostalgia should be rigorously practical, for that is not the frame of emotional mind it stimulates. But nostalgia, for all its emotional imagination, should remain tethered to the realistic if it is to have valence for green politics. Otherwise, it is too easy to dismiss as fantasy and utopian dreaming.

Furthermore, ecological nostalgia can also be explicitly anti-environmental. As I was working on this project during a "writing spring break" on the Oregon Coast, I found it amusing that as I sketched out ideas about ecological nostalgia, I sat under a Coors beer sign in a "sportsman's bar" that proclaimed "Protect Our West" and showed images of axes felling trees. Here is an ecological nostalgia of a different type, one historically tied to resource extraction and the virtual extirpation of ancient forests in America. Similarly, Paul Krugman in a recent *New York Times* column calls Trump's rescinding of Obama's climate change policies and support for

the coal industry perplexing, given that the industry "is no longer a major employer even in West Virginia." He goes on to rhetorically, if hyperbolically, ask, "Will nostalgia for a much-shrunken industry destroy the planet?"[xli] Nostalgia for a time when coal jobs powered the American economy and the timber industry was at the center of a Pacific Northwest social contract can work against a more ecologically grounded nostalgia concerned with the preservation of robust, self-willed ecosystems.

We might even say that ecological nostalgia inevitably alters the very thing that one yearns for. Take the case of Thoreau's *Walden*. As Schama provocatively asks, "What did *Walden* do to Walden?"[xlii] Thoreau's account of a sanctuary portrayed as a refuge from "civilization" was never appreciated in his lifetime. But the book is now a classic of American environmental literature and brings tourists from all over the world to visit the pond and woods outside of Concord. How did Thoreau change Walden? What role does nostalgia, in this case the nostalgia for *Thoreau's* Walden, and perhaps for the lost "America" it signifies, play in its current reality? Whether intended or not, for good or for ill, memory and nostalgia alter reality.

Affirmations of ecological nostalgia as a political emotion

How can the memory-shine of ecological nostalgia support a more affirmative green politics? Drawing on Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, let me suggest that ecological nostalgia has the potential to inspire restorative projects and provide opportunities for deeper reflection about environmental change. Restorative projects are goal-oriented and concerned with results. In contrast, reflective nostalgia does not necessarily provide an immediate and strategic impulse for accomplishment. Rather, it is more of an invitation to reflect, recall, and perhaps be surprised by the power of memory and association. Reflective nostalgia invites intellectual, affective, and ethical relationships to past ecologies.

Both forms of ecological nostalgia have the power to link private histories with public goods. By reflecting on one's lost personal environment, one inevitably encounters a public ecological context shared by others. At the same time, one's individual retrospections are influenced by collective nostalgia. At a time when pressures to break apart, atomize, and isolate are strong, as they are now, ecological nostalgia has the potential to link strangers in a collective field of environmental imagination.

In a similar fashion, ecological nostalgia connects subjective, lived experiences with epistemic knowledge about ecological conditions, past, present, and future. In doing so, it engages one in long-term thinking and links favorably, for instance, with the permaculture movement and efforts for deep sustainability. The Slow Food movement also comes to mind, as nostalgia for a slower pace of life through food and community isn't just about a past reverie but about actively resisting lifestyles that are rushed, superficial, and environmentally damaging.

Ecological nostalgia encourages care for the world and strong connections to place and home. Kirpatrick Sale (2000) in *Dwellers in the Land* writes of the Spanish notion of *querencia*, or the "love of home… a deep, quiet sense of inner well-being that comes from knowing a particular place on earth, its diurnal and seasonal patterns, its fruits and scents, its history and its part in your life… where, whenever you return to it, your soul releases an inner sigh of recognition and relaxation.[xliii] Put this way, ecological nostalgia is a kind of *querencia*.

For some communities, this can operate on the level of cultural rejuvenation. When wolves were re-introduced to Idaho in the 1990's, a member of the Nez Pearce tribe recalled welcoming the species back to the landscape as an "old friend."[xliv] In this sense, ecological nostalgia can assist the decolonization process.

Another positive impact for political consciousness is the desire for stability. Stability need not mean a conservative skepticism toward change, nor a resistance to change as such. It is about stable, evolutionary, and measured change, or what's known in ecology as *homerrhesis*. Ecological nostalgia is problematic if it idealizes a static ecological past. But if, instead, it seeks the wisdom of the resilience of ecosystems and human practices that work within ecological limits, then such nostalgia can be salutary, helpful, and productive. It is a remembrance of life's vitality, creativity, fecundity, and generative properties that enable evolution and change without passing through dangerous tipping points. And human communities that lived in relationships to nature that were not based on runaway economic growth and development.

Finally, ecological nostalgia can avoid the critique of utopian irrelevance because it is not totalistic. Rather, it is focused on past ecological contexts and specific about place. Ecological nostalgia does not have to be about some privatized, mystical Eden. And while ecological nostalgia may often be associated with aesthetic values such as the beautiful and sublime, it does so because these are structures of feeling that are powerful allies of memory, experience, and ecological balance. For instance, Schama writes that certain landscape painters trafficking in the sublime didn't see their depictions of nature as *otherworldly* beauty. Rather, their emotional force was activated in the beholder through remembered phenomenon such as stories, myths, histories, poetry, music, and actual memories of those landscapes.[xlv] Again, the question comes down to, what kind of stories and myths, and in what doses?

Part III: Children, Species, Dams, and Cities

In this last section, I'd like to sketch particular examples of ecological nostalgia and sketch what ecological and social goals they serve. I look at the connection between ecological nostalgia and childhood, efforts to conserve species, dam removal and the revival of river ecosystems, and the greening of cities and country through memory.

Children and nostalgia

Memories from childhood can have permanent impact. Many environmentalists, myself included, trace their love of nature to time spent outside playing or camping. Memory researchers note that people are able to recall events from childhood through early adulthood because this period of significant development is accompanied by powerful emotional resonances.[xlvi] Wordsworth took as the inspiration for his imagination not the adult but the wondering child and was quite deliberate in adopting this kind of muse.[xlvii] Thoreau writes in *Walden* of remembering the serious play of childhood in which he rambled the forest and his field of beans, potatoes, turnips and peas, uncovering artifacts human and ecological. And in "Ponds," he comments famously, "My muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?"[xlviii] Willa Cather's novels, especially *My Antonia*, are permeated with nostalgia for old, agrarian Nebraska before the onset of development and more intensive agriculture.[xlix]

The direct experience of a sensuous world that is alive and breathing has a powerful impact on a child's mind-body, and ultimately feelings toward nature. As David Abram in *Becoming Animal* writes of his young daughter Hannah's fresh experience of the world:

> The self begins as an extension of the breathing flesh of the world… To a small child, awareness is a ubiquitous quality of the world… At each step of her inward unfolding

> she'll discover wider differences between herself and the apple tree, yet she'll measure each difference as a difference in *feeling*, as a strangely different way of experiencing the same sky, the same ground, the same rain that she herself experiences… Such, at any rate, is the mature fruit of the human child's spontaneous affinity with trees, spiders, stones, and storm clouds, when that seed is allowed to grow and blossom. Only after such an unimpeded childhood does a grown woman know in her bones that she inhabits a breathing cosmos, that her life is embedded in a wild community of dynamically intertwined and yet weirdly different lives."[l]

The ecological nostalgia invoked by childhood is of a world that is alive with possibility and populated by beings whose existence and otherness are accepted as a matter of course. This attitude is very important to a bio-egalitarian environmental ethic. It is sometimes said that we are socialized to view humanity as superior to other creatures. Children don't necessarily think so. They must *learn about* the inferiority of other creatures and the comforting rationalizations of human exceptionalism.

Raymond Williams (1973) writes that, as children, we are absorbed by nature. The experience is close and intimate, surrounding our world without debilitating self-consciousness.[li] These kinds of direct experiences stay with you, furnishing what Williams calls an "unforgettable clarity."[lii] But when we are older, we see nature and ourselves at a distance. We are separate and critical as observers and are not as immersed in our worlds. Nostalgia is inherently part of this critical separation, possible only because of it. Williams writes, "The only landscape I ever see, in dreams, is the Black Mountain village in which I was born. When I go back to that country, I feel a recovery of a particular kind of life… But the problem has always been, for most people, how to go on living where they are."[liii] Is this recall of childhood memories and moods about a dead past or, crucially, one that influences, animates, and impacts the present? Of course, childhood memory is not history in any objective sense. It is about reminiscing and remembrance. To Williams, what is important for the adult whose world is largely one of "alienation, separation, externality, and abstraction," is that nostalgic childhood

memories recall a "perception and affirmation of a world in which one is not necessarily a stranger and an agent, but can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life."[liv] This retrospection can lead to wistful resignation. But it doesn't have to. It can re-vivify a person to find ways to overcome alienation from nature and other human beings.

To Schama, the ecological nostalgia of childhood is also a teacher of life's joys and terrors. He writes,

> If a child's vision of nature can already be loaded with complicating memories, myths, and meanings, how much more elaborately wrought is the frame through which our adult eyes survey the landscape. For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.[lv]

These memories of time spent as a youth in the forest are to Schama at once "shaggy and smooth, dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic."[lvi] Ecological nostalgia for childhood isn't just about pleasant memories. They can also be about terrifying but important lessons learned when confronted by nature's indifference to our plight.

Children's experiences also raise important questions of colonialized mentalities and the need for a decolonized control of narratives and stories. Donna Haraway writes;

> A book project put together by a friend of mine who died a couple of months ago, Allison Jolly, a primatologist who studies lemurs in Madagascar and was deeply involved in conservation. Alison was horrified by the fact that Malagasy children study European animals and have no literature or animal fables in the Malagasy language, or pictures of Malagasy animals, the Madagascar flora and fauna. She and her colleagues have produced an astonishing series of about ten children's books that are bilingual in Malagasy and English. *Real* natural history. These are *exciting* animal stories, fabulous animal stories, that are an effort to inculcate in the young a love of place, a love of home.[lvii]

Haraway's comments point to the need for de-colonized children's environmental literature, but also literature that doesn't treat animals and the natural world as an anthropomorphized

instrument of colonization, and the colonization of children's imagination by commercial and other forces. Of course, children are impressionable and parents are known to re-live their own childhood nostalgia through their kids. And it's not just parents – a whole generation's nostalgia can impact the tastes and preferences of a new cohort of children. Star Wars is the most popular movie franchise in my kindergartner's class. My son even claimed when asked what his favorite movie was and his response was Star Wars, even though he'd never seen the film.

Childhood is our only personal link to the "old normal." Without those memories, what is here now seems to have always been here. This is a strong reason to cultivate relations to nature that are immersive and personal in children. Who knows how it may inspire ecological nostalgia in the future, but surely it does.

Species Revival and Nostalgia

Climate change may be a more dominant narrative in environmental politics, but the extinction crisis, in my view, deserves similar attention. The two phenomena are profoundly linked. Yet from the perspective of ecological nostalgia, climate change seems more detectable as a matter of practical experience. People seem more capable of perceiving warmer winters, earlier blooms, the flattening of temperatures between day and night than they can the slow eradication of an endangered species. Species loss is more hidden from view. But powerful currents of ecological nostalgia are stirred when confronted with the permanence of extinction.

Fueled by a sense of urgency and, I think, pre-emptive nostalgia, projects like Maya Lin's What is Missing?[lviii] and Joel Sartore's Photo Ark[lix] call attention to the rapid decline in species loss by documenting species at severe risk of extinction. The re-introduction of species, such as wolves to Yellowstone and Idaho, and proposals to re-introduce grizzly bears to the North

Cascades, represent nostalgic efforts to restore major links in ecological webs that have been fragmented. We might even say that restorative ecological nostalgia plays a strong part in efforts to de-extinct species through DNA reconstruction.[lx]

Another example of pre-emptive nostalgia comes from efforts to save a threatened earthworm and the last remnants of native prairie habitat on the Palouse. The saga of the giant Palouse earthworm – a once-thought extinct species of worm endemic to the rolling hills of SE Washington and Idaho – raises a number of questions about the *extinction crisis* – the quietly unfolding process of biodepletion – and the *extinction predicament* – the epistemological, ethical, and political challenges that stand in the way of ameliorating the crisis. The first issue is that we don't know much about what is being lost and what kind of extinction debt is being loaded for the future, as biodiversity loss can take decades or centuries to manifest. The plight of the giant Palouse earthworm is emblematic of the extinction crisis: just as we are beginning to understand and more comprehensively catalogue the biological heritage of the earth, species are either disappearing or their future in the wild looks increasingly grim. The thrill of discovering new species is tempered by the tragic realization that many do not have a future. The second problem is the constantly shifting perception of what are considered "normal" and "healthy" levels of biodiversity. A few generations ago, the giant Palouse earthworm was common. Now, under a "new normal," we are surprised to find any in existence. We risk adjusting to new experiences of a "normal" ecology without recognizing how quickly, and at what scale, humans have transformed the biosphere in the time span of only a few generations. Nostalgia for the giant Palouse worm has sparked environmental activists on the Palouse to protect vestiges of the native Palouse prairie and fired the imagination of school children who've taken on worm conservation and the search for giants in the soil as a matter of educational and civic pride. The

kind of nostalgia that motivates people to protect endangered species can be intentional in its purpose. But it can also be unintentional. To Karen Litfin, sometimes wildlife conservation is a natural by-product of intentional, green practices found in ecovillages like small dwellings, water preservation, organic farming, and reduced consumption. She writes, "Wildlife conservation deserves conscious pursuit, but it also comes as a natural consequence of green living… Every dimension of ecology entailed in ecovillage life… is also good for other species."[lxi]

Dam Removal and Nostalgia

Nostalgia for restoring river ecosystems on a large scale can be seen in efforts to de-commission dams. There are exciting developments when it comes to the idea of seeing rivers as entities with legal rights. Building off the innovative "right of nature" provisions in Ecuador's constitution, New Zealand's Whanganui river was declared a legal entity in 2012 that is entitled to certain remedies.[lxii] An Indian court just ruled that the Ganges and Yamuna rivers are accorded legal rights on par with human beings.[lxiii] While rivers in North America have not received such protections, there is a movement to push for the removal of dams to return native fish and replenish river ecosystems.

I'm particularly interested in what's happening in Washington State's restoration of the Elwah river system. For over 100 years, a privately constructed electrical dam on the Elwah River prevented salmon from accessing ancestral spawning beds, altering the ecology of the Olympic Mountains river systems. But in 2011 it was taken down, largely for ecological purposes, and is the world's largest dam removal project. The rewilding has been remarkable, astonishing scientists who have come to study the ecology of dam removal and the prospects for decommissioning dams around the country and the world.[lxiv]

Similarly, environmental activists in the Inland Northwest have been agitating for years to remove four dams on the Lower Snake River to allow salmon traditional access to spawning grounds in Eastern Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.[lxv] Not only is this about salmon in inland rivers and streams. There is increasing evidence that Puget Sound orcas, who are alarmingly endangered, are primarily threatened by the dwindling stocks of their main food source: chinook salmon. Chinook numbers have been down for decades, in part because of dams like those that block passage up the Snake River.[lxvi]

These examples show the possibilities of harnessing ecological nostalgia to return river ecosystems to a free-flowing, more ecologically abundant past. They illustrate the potential of restorative nostalgia can have on specific projects and particular courses of political action.

Nostalgia for Country AND City

What happens to ecological nostalgia when we become urbanized, for humanity is rapidly becoming an urban species? Roughly ten years ago, humans passed a new threshold: 50% of humanity now lives in urban locales. If current trends continue, 70-75% of human will live in conurbations by 2050. What will this do for the lived experiences that create ecological nostalgia? *Nostalgie de la boue* translates as "nostalgia for the mud," which, among other associations, is about a homesickness for the countryside, and for simple, uncomplicated living not found in cities. In Japan, the oft-talked about concept of *furusato* (hometown) captures a similar spirit of feelings held by recent migrants to cities who fondly recall their homes and families in the *inaka* (countryside). Nostalgia for one's country of origin, and the maintenance of family, culture, and ecology through the tending of gardens is well documented through studies of immigrants gardening, even in cities.[lxvii]

We can even note the nostalgia for past ecologies in a nation's history. Frederick Jackson Turner's famous essay about the end of the frontier stirred up in some a nostalgia for an America that still had a frontier – nostalgia for frontier life.[lxviii] One critic, citing a kind of blasphemy, called Turner's frontier thesis something "pretty close to treason."[lxix]

Even industrial, rust-belt cities in the American Midwest can be said to have a kind of nostalgia for their ecological past. Cleveland, for instance, still refers to itself as the "forest city," recalling the time when the city had abundant forest cover (which is now only 19% and declining).[lxx] That may seem like a joke to some, but it is deadly serious to environmentalists seeking to green previously industrial urban landscapes.

Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) notes that attitudes toward city and country mutually constitutive in many ways. Positively, with the country associated with peace, innocence, and simple virtue and cities as places of learning, communication and light. Negatively, with the country critiqued as backward, ignorant, and limited, and cities as places of noise, worldliness, and ambition.[lxxi] It is interesting to note that these comparisons need each other. To understand the city one must understand the country, and vice versa.

Conclusion

This preliminary attempt to investigate ecological nostalgia has raised questions about a phenomenon that is a natural human response to environmental and social change. What cognitive and affective shifts can come by attending to experiences of ecological nostalgia? What value is there in this sort of retrospection and reverie? How can nostalgia be harnessed for restoration, rewilding, and care for the world? Can it serve as a template for reflection about

ecological changes and inform political questions about causes of ecological change and their many deleterious effects? Is it possible, as environmental historian Donald Worster suggests, that nostalgia be associated with hope?[lxxii]

By way of a conclusion, I'll suggest one more question: What exactly are we nostalgic for when it comes to ecological nostalgia? I would suggest two intertwined things – community and a connection to nature. The nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft* (organically bonded communities), even if fictional and only partially authentic, is a real response to *Geselleschaft* (aggregates of individuals connected only by transactional and material interests). The preamble to the Turtle Island Bioregional Congress captures these twin longings well:

> Welcome Home. A growing number of people are recognizing that in order to secure the clean air, water and food that we need to healthfully survive, we have to become stewards of the places where we live. People sense the loss in not knowing our neighbors and natural surroundings, and are discovering that the best way to take care of ourselves, and to get to know our neighbors, is to protect and restore where we live.[lxxiii]

Is this political and ecological nostalgia just nice words and pleasant sentiments? If not, what is the point of ecological nostalgia if doesn't have a real impact on the world? At the end of his dystopian love story, *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy writes,

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.[lxxiv]

Ecological nostalgia, to have relevance to environmental political theory, must not fall prey to the fatalism that species can't be saved, rivers restored, or human communities be made sustainable. Ecological nostalgia can't be merely idle retrospection about the past. Environmental political theorists should insist that it be relevant to thought and praxis. Ecological nostalgia has a unique power to challenge the willful blindness and hubris of the

present, and the reflexive uncritical acceptance of an "inexorable" future. As Donna Haraway remarks, "The activation of the cthonic powers is within our grasp as we collect up the trash of the Anthropocene and the exterminism of the Capitalocene, (and offers) something that might possibly have a chance of ongoing."[lxxv] If not, it is hard to see future humans being nostalgic for *us* and the degraded planet we leave behind. Why would they?

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[lxix] Cited in Sale (2000), 138, 140
[lxx] Hamilton (2016)
[lxxi] Williams (1973), 1
[lxxii] Worster (1994)
[lxxiii] Cited in Sale (2000), 172
[lxxiv] McCarthy (2006), 286-287
[lxxv] Haraway (2014)