“Let’s Look Under the City”

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Aldo Leopold famously wrote, in the opening pages of *A Sand County Almanac*, that “there are two spiritual dangers to not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.” (6). The trope is familiar, frequently repeated in various forms in discussions of environmental problems and forming the basis of a kind of critique of urbanized modernity for having lost touch with the natural basis of our lives. We take the ordinary objects of our lives for granted, that critique asserts, viewing them as part of the unremarkable furniture of the man-made world that we inhabit, but failing to acknowledge that ultimately they come from *somewhere else*, from a world of “nature” that stands outside the urban world but upon which it ultimately depends. Here’s another clear statement of this, from a 2013 book by Haydn Washington:

The majority of the human population lives in cities … [and so] many of us now spend less time in natural systems and don’t grow up experiencing Nature or gain a feel for the land and how ecosystems work…. Schools by and large do not teach about how the world *really* works. Food does not come from supermarkets but from ecosystems. Timber does not come from timber yards but from ecosystems. Apart from synthetics, clothing does not come from stores but from ecosystems. Even our synthetic clothes are made from the residue of past ecosystems that formed into oil…. Yet modern society by and large *operates as if these things were not true*, and children still grow up being ignorant of them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We think of our urban world, according to this trope, as self-contained and self-sufficient, but in fact it stands atop another world that we fail to see – a hidden realm that makes the one we inhabit possible, and without which in fact our ordinary world would quickly collapse. Further, our failure to notice that other realm, its invisibility to us, is a marker of a kind of character flaw. Leopold talks of the “spiritual danger” that failure represents, but in other versions the danger is quite physical: Washington for instance says that we ignore what he calls our dependence on nature “at our peril” and the peril he is talking about is ecosystemic collapse, or even global environmental catastrophe. By failing to acknowledge our dependence on nature, or indeed even nature’s existence as something without which none of the ordinary objects of our lives could come to be, we hubristically see ourselves as lords of the universe, unlimited in terms of our possibilities and capable of doing whatever we wish.

It is the invisibility of nature in the urbanized world that produces the problem, which according to this trope is essentially an epistemic one. To say that nature is invisible is to say that we do not recognize it as the source of the objects with which we have to do in our urban lives. We think that our food comes from the supermarket, our gas from the pump, our water from the faucet, not understanding that those places are merely way-stations in a what is actually a much longer chain that ultimately points back nature: the land on which the food is grown, the ponds and streams and aquifers that provide us with water, the (finite) deposits of fossilized organic material from which we derive the fuel we burn. To overcome our dangerous hubris we need to rescue nature from its invisibility by bringing those chains into the light, tracing the objects of our urban lives back to their ultimate source in a more primordial realm that is prior to the urban, and upon which the urban rests; without that action of tracing we remain prey to the delusion that the urban world is all there is. But to make that move, Leopold suggests, also requires a change in lifestyle – a move, precisely, out of the city and back to the farm. Washington argues similarly, asserting that children need to live in close touch with nature in order to learn the crucial lesson here as well. The critique of the hiddenness of nature In the urbanized world thus turns into a critique of urbanism itself, precisely because the latter is marked by nature’s invisibility. The call is for some other mode of life in which nature and its role as the source of all we do and are is brought into the light and no longer obscured.

We might call the version just described of the idea that there is something before or beneath the urban that is its source the enlightenment version. But there is another form that idea takes, one that is more suspicious of the notion that the hidden dependence of the objects of our ordinary urban lives on something that underlies them requires bringing that hidden something into the light. We might call it, for lack of a better name, the post-structuralist version. It finds a (relatively) clear formulation in the distinction that Heidegger draws, most directly in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” between “earth” and “world.” To oversimplify significantly: he associates “world” with the lived meaningful structured environment that human beings experience themselves as inhabiting (or as he would say, in which they dwell). It is the home, the village, the neighborhood in which I feel myself to belong. It is the world in which I live my life, the ordinary backdrop of that life that is always already suffused with meaning and structured by (but also structuring) my concerns. And this is so whether it be the world of the peasant woman whose shoes Heidegger thinks he sees in the painting by Van Gogh that he famously discusses, a world of “wintry field” and “ripening grain” and the simple home with its stove and bed, or the world of the academic philosopher who sits in his suburban house surrounded by books and photographs and coffee cups and a computer on which he types. It is marked by what Heidegger calls “reliability”: the objects within it gain their own meaning from the world as such, and are taken for granted and used in everyday life without a second thought, almost never failing to have the significance and play the role they are expected to play. This meaningful, organized, taken-for-granted world is the world of the everyday: and in particular, it is the world I referred to above when I spoke of the urbanized world in which we live – we might even say that a world par excellence is the city, where I do not mean so much the Greek city that Heidegger so admired but rather the city as we know it now: New York, San Francisco, Abu Dhabi, Shanghai – meaningful totalities in which people dwell in ways that express their communities (Heidegger would say: express themselves as a people), in which the ordinary objects, food, supermarkets, water, faucets, are taken as being just the way they appear, or rather are not “taken” at all, but simply used, reliable, we might even say: natural.

But the world, for Heidegger, Is not all there is. The great work of art, he claims – the painting by Van Gogh, or the Greek temple he also famously describes in the essay – “sets up” a world – the world of the peasant woman, the world of the people whose temple it was – but it also is made of something, has a materiality about it: the paint, the canvas, the stones of which the temple is built, the rock on which it stands. And that materiality he calls “earth,” and importantly associates it when he first defines it (168) with the Greek “physis,” i.e. nature. He says it is “that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground the earth.” Earth is that on which the world depends, that on which it is grounded. It supports and makes possible the world, while not itself being part of it: it is quite literally the ground beneath our feet, whose role in making possible our walking we never notice – and so once again it is the hidden feature of the world, the one that underlies but is not part of the ordinary meaningful realm in which we live from day to day.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But earth for Heidegger is, crucially, “self-secluding,” and here the difference from I have called the enlightenment view appears. World is precisely the realm of the visible, while earth is the realm of the essentially hidden: Heidegger’s point is that visibility depends upon invisibility, that the world of our experience, our understanding, our knowledge, inevitably rests upon an earth that cannot be experienced or understood or known but that rather makes those things possible. “The world grounds itself upon the earth,” he writes, but also “the earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is essentially undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up” (172). The temple stands upon the rock, and so reveals it as rock, but the rock itself reveals nothing. In a curious and important passage Heidegger describes the impossibility of earth’s self-revelation as follows: “A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been opened up. The stone is instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments” (172). World, that is, depends on earth, but only world is meaningful to us and so only world is visible or knowable; earth must remain hidden and so can never be known. For this view, therefore, the enlightenment optimism that if we only bring the hidden sources of our food or fuel or water into the light we would come to understand the urban world’s dependence on nature is misguided; the point is rather that there is always something hidden and that it is precisely the urban world’s delusory belief that everything is or could be open and clear that needs to be questioned. The idea that we could somehow reveal everything upon which our familiar lives depend, make the farms and aquifers and so forth familiar too, is precisely the dream of urbanizing everything, bringing it all into the city. More important is to recognize that all familiarity depends on the unfamiliar, the hidden, the earth – and to identify that, that which is not only unknown but must be unknown, with nature itself.

The difference between these versions of the basic trope is important, and there is much more to be said about it, and about them. But despite their differences, they both agree that there is something *below* the urban, something *upon which* it stands, which is not itself urban but makes the urban possible (I’m tempted to call it the sub-urban, but will try to fight the temptation). Their disagreement is only as to whether the hiddenness of this grounding or foundation can be overcome or not, that is whether it is contingent or necessary. But it is the point on which they agree – that beneath the urban is something other than the urban, something un-urban, let’s call it the natural, upon which the urban stands – that I want to question today.

For what is it that stands under the city? What supports it? What do we find hidden below it? If we take those questions seriously, and ask what we would see if we could look under the city, we find that the answer is quite different from the one that either the enlightenment or the Heideggerian view proposes. Here are some images from under the city – in this case the city is New York:

What stands below the city, it turns out, is indeed something that is hidden from those who inhabit it, something – indeed, a set of things – that makes the ordinary life of the city possible, and without which the city could not function, without which the mundane familiarity of urban life would collapse. But it is neither nature nor Heideggerian “earth” that stands beneath the city: it is rather a complex and almost incomprehensible infrastructure. In New York there are 443 miles of underground subway track – and *that* part is not so hidden (although often forgotten while one walks or works or sleeps above it); but more to the point there are 6,302 miles of pipes transporting natural gas, 100 miles of pipes with steam, 6,800 miles of water pipes. There are three great water tunnels, the last of which is still incomplete and under construction, using (among other tools) a tunnel boring machine capable of producing a hole with a diameter of 23 feet. There are 7,400 miles of sewer pipes. Both water and sewer pipes are attached via smaller pipes to each building, as are the pipes with steam. And then there are the electrical conduits, the telephone wires (all required to have been placed underground in 1889 after a massive blizzard the year before had wreaked havoc on the thousands of above-ground poles and wires), telegraph wires, fiber optic cables. There is a complex system of pneumatic tubes that was heavily used during the mid-20th century for mail delivery. Those are no longer used, of course, but are still there – as are the telegraph wires, pipes that go nowhere, abandoned subway stations (and the relics of an earlier attempt at a subway that failed), etc. And since of course most of these lines and pipes and conduits and tunnels need to be serviced and maintained, there are hundreds of miles more of tunnels and other passageways for workers to use to access them – workers who also of course need access to the streets above as well, requiring vertical holes with ladders of various sorts throughout New York.

*This* is what stands beneath the city, what supports and makes urban life possible. It is hidden, unknown to many, unthought about by almost all, the secret and invisible source of the ordinary life we engage in so straightforwardly and unthinkingly in the city – that we are engaging in right now – unaware of all that is going on below us, that must go on below us, to make it possible, here, now, for us to see each other, to have this meeting, to stay in this hotel, to use its elevators and light sources and microphones and bathrooms. Those hundreds and thousands of pipes and conduits and drains and wires and crawlspaces that stand below us are unknown to us, unconsidered as we live our ordinary lives with their familiar objects and their familiar characteristics and charms; and yet without them none of that would be possible. Leopold says that farm life would disabuse us of the illusion that food comes from the grocery or heat from the furnace; but there are arguably more illusions at work here, now, than those, and those might not be the key ones. In New York, where I grew up, heat seemed to come not from a furnace but from a radiator, noisy and clanky, right in the corner of my room. But living on a farm and chopping wood would not have allayed my illusion, despite what Leopold says, for that had nothing to do with the source of heat in the apartment I lived in. It rather would have made more sense for me to live beneath the street, following the pipes filled with scalding steam at high pressure back to the steam generation plant on the east side of Manhattan that consists of several massive boilers (one is 95 feet high) which heat water up to 350 degrees to produce more than one million pounds of steam per hour – steam that is then sent through those pipes throughout the city, and is used not only to heat buildings but also to power dry cleaning plants, run restaurant dishwashers, sterilize medical equipment in hospitals and even (back in the day) produce the smoke coming out of the famous Camel advertisement in Times Square.

But this isn’t quite right either. Leopold’s point is the enlightenment one, whose mottos could be said to be “Trace everything to its source! No black boxes!” Yet even had I traced the steam in my childhood radiator back to the boilers in the Con Ed plant that wouldn’t have been sufficient, and I’m afraid the spiritual danger he worried about would have had to remain. For are they the source? They’re fed, after all, by water – millions of gallons a day, that come in through those three water tunnels previously mentioned, whose own sources are far away – in Croton, in the Catskills, etc. But if I were to try to trace those tunnels back to *their* sources (and which one would I trace?) I’d be ignoring the fact that the boilers have to be fueled in order to heat the water to those high temperatures. Where does the fuel come from? Well, one source is coal, that arrives on barges that float up the East River (which is why the Con Ed plant was built there) from many far-away places, but some also comes from natural gas, which is brought in other sorts of underground pipes, again from many different places that themselves are thousands of miles away. But that isn’t all – because the powerful machines that pulverize the coal, and those that help to pump the natural gas, and for that matter the lights and instruments and computers that make it possible for the operators to maintain and oversee the system as best they can, themselves require electricity, and so I would have to trace those electric lines back to *their* sources, which themselves turn out to be myriad – and indeed include, in a weird Ouroborus-like image suggesting some kind of perpetual motion machine, the Con Ed boilers themselves, which are also used to generate electricity for the power grid. And of course among the instruments the operators employ, that require electric power to function, are computers, which themselves work only by being connected, via fiber-optic cables, to the World Wide Web -- a fact that produces some anxiety among those who worry about the security of critical infrastructure like this against malicious hackers.

So what was *the source* of that heat, when I was a child? Did it have a source? For that matter, what was the source of the heat on Leopold’s farm? He says that to avoid the spiritual danger one “should lay a split of good oak on the andirons, preferably where there is no furnace,” and that if one “has cut, split, hold, and piled his own good oak, and let his mind work a while, he will remember much about where the heat comes from, and with a wealth of detail denied to those who spend the weekend in town astride a radiator.” (6) But I wonder a bit about those andirons, and where they came from, and I have the same wonder about the ax with which the oak was cut and split, or where the andirons and ax were bought (or did Leopold, afraid of the spiritual danger of thinking the ax came from the hardware store, make them himself?). I even worry about the provenance of the oak, and whether it came from an old-growth forest or not.

In appealing to the “wealth of detail” the person who cuts and splits the wood she uses for heat comes to learn, and comparing it to the ignorance of the weekenders who (somehow) sit astride (?) a radiator, Leopold betrays his enlightenment assumption, which wants to open up the black box of the takenness-for-granted of the urban world and thus the way in which the weekenders, or the little boy in Manhattan, observe (or rather fail to observe) the radiator, and – because I’m kind of an enlightenment type too – I agree with him. And yet to trace my radiator back to the Con Ed boilers, to see the multifarious and complex processes involved in their functioning, to follow the many routes into them (coal barge, water main, gas pipeline, fiber-optic cables) and out of them (steam, sewage) as well, would surely have been to come to know at least as much a wealth of detail as I would have had I placed the wood I had cut on the andirons myself.

But no matter how wealthy the detail, it should be obvious, it would never be complete – the enlightenment dream of total visibility, of no black boxes, could never be achieved. That’s more clearly the moral of the story of the steam radiator than it is of the story of the rural fireplace, although I’d argue it’s actually the moral of both. As such, it points towards what I called the post-structuralist or Heideggerian understanding of what’s “under the city” – the one that emphasizes that the visibility dreamt of by enlightenment, and thus the straightforward clarity and ease of the urban world in which water and heat and light and all the other things we require are simply there, always depends upon and presupposes other realms that are hidden, dark, unknown and unknowable. *There is no single “source”* of the heat the urban world takes for granted, nor the water, nor the food. Food doesn’t come from the grocery store, but it doesn’t come from the farm either – or rather it would be better to say it comes from both, and comes, too, from the store where the farmer bought his implements, or from the trucks that brought the harvest to the market, or the fuels that make those trucks run, or the cell phone towers that allowed the conversations among the brokers at the Chicago Board of Trade whose orders helped determine the price that led the farmer to plant and harvest what and when he did. The mistake is to think that “tracing sources” is a linear matter, discovering that A is not self-sufficient but rather depends on B, and B on C, and so on backwards until one finds the ultimate source – whose name, according to the trope we are examining, is “nature,” the ultimate ground or source of everything in the urban world. If I understood Deleuze – which I don’t – I’d be inclined here to distinguish between an arboreal and a rhizomatic account: the structure of dependence here is like that of a rhizome, heat coming from boilers which are filled with water that flows from reservoirs, but which are also made of steel that comes from steel factories that might themselves be heated by the boilers’ steam, and all of them functioning only in the presence of electronic devices that depend on power plants that might include the boilers too, directed by computers connected to each other by fiber optic cables that were laid by workers from telecommunication companies under contracts that were negotiated by attorneys who generated documents printed on paper made from trees thousands of miles away whose growth had been managed by workers from timber companies employing tools designed by industrial designers in New York whose offices were heated by Con Ed’s steam and who were only willing to work in those offices because it had bathrooms with flush toilets that efficiently removed their urine and feces into a well-functioning sewer system. The structure here is so complex as to be unknowable, even unimaginable. It’s interesting to note that *here is no map of the underground of New York City*. Attempts have been made to produce one, using GIS and similar technologies, but none have so far been produced; and indeed – and this is relevant too, for it shows that the limits and dangers of the enlightenment desire for full transparency – after the events of September 2001 those attempts were put on hold, because of fears that no-one *should* be able to know the full story. But of course probably no one ever could: there are too many unknown and unremembered pipes, unexplained anterooms, uncharted side tunnels, ladders to nowhere.

But if looking under the city, trying to discover what it is upon which the city really depends, what really supports it, shows the fallacy in the enlightenment idea of tracing everything back into its source in nature, it also, I want to suggest, shows what is wrong with the “post-structuralist” idea as well, at least in its Heideggerian version. For Heidegger, as we have seen, world depends on earth, which is to say that the apparently self-sufficient realm of the visible in which we feel at home depends on an inevitably invisible and indeed self-secluding realm that escapes our every attempt to grasp it: but that’s not right either. The rock on which the temple stands, we saw Heidegger saying, does not reveal itself when we break it in two, but rather “instantly withdraws again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments” and so almost mockingly “denies us any penetration into it.” And yet this turns out to be false, as every rider of the subway ought to recognize: we can indeed break into the rock, indeed in cities like New York we have done so repeatedly, and what we discover there is not the hiddenness and invisibility of what Heidegger calls earth but rather precisely a *world* – the world (or worlds) of the underground.

This is what is so fascinating about some of these images: that the secret hidden world upon which our visible familiar one depends itself is a recognizable world, a world that looks, in part, like the one we know but that at the same time is so unfamiliar as to be almost unimaginable, but still *there*. Much environmental thinking, especially the kind that has been influenced by Heidegger and by phenomenology, has emphasized the importance of “place” – of the small-scale meaningful locales in which we feel at home and that afford us the comfort and clarity that make possible (and are presupposed by) our everyday life. What’s curious and compelling about these sorts of images of underground life is that these are places too, organized in their experienced structures by the fact that human beings inhabit them – workers who spend hours a day there, homeless people who take shelter there, so-called “moles” who simply prefer to live down there. Those places stand below and support the urban lives we lead, but they too are urban, while at the same time they are so alien as to seem uncanny: is that really here, under our feet, right now? And note of course that we support *them*, too: without our flushing, nothing happens in the sewers; without our need for transportation, no subway tunnels would offer routes for moles, no abandoned stations would provide them places to sleep.

Yet to say that the underground is urban too, is also a place just like the places we inhabit up here above them, isn’t quite right either. For it *is* alien and uncanny (*unheimlich* is the German term Heidegger and Freud use, and it means “un-home-like”), and it seems so, I imagine, even to those who spend many hours there. And much of the underground is uninhabited, of course. The point perhaps isn’t that it consists of “places” but that every aspect of it possesses the capacity to *become* a place. Stories of a submarine (even a remote-controlled one) traveling through the water mains fill us with a kind of awe; so do tales of intrepid “place-hackers,” urban explorers who try to find their way into hidden corners of the subterranean world where no-one is supposed to go. Simply the fact that the water system is there, that the water that comes out of the faucet in lower Manhattan actually made the long journey from a reservoir in the Catskills through the extended chambers of a very slowly sloping aqueduct over hundreds of miles, through a tunnel deep in the rock under the Hudson River, and then over the High Bridge across the Harlem River too, falling slowly under the influence of gravity but (if one lives on a low enough level) pushed quickly upwards by sufficient pressure at the end to get to one’s glass (and otherwise being pumped there from the basement of one’s apartment building) – just imagining that trip is enough to produce a kind of uncanny astonishment. For although each of those stages may be invisible in the sense that no-one is there to see them, still they are not only in principle seeable but also were built, and in that sense were at their very origin part of the world that human beings know, plan, see, produce.

All this suggests that neither the enlightenment nor the Heideggerian view of the hiddenness of that upon which the urban depends is correct. It’s true, as they both insist, that the simple familiarity and visibility of the objects of everyday urban life rest upon a foundation that is not itself familiar or visible. But on the one hand the enlightenment view is wrong in that total visibility is not possible: there is no map of the underground, no “bottom rung,” no element of the support structure of the urban that is not itself supported by something else. The search for an ultimate origin involves a modernist image of linear or arboreal support, but the real situation is rhizomatic. Yet on the other hand the idea that visibility always depends on a hiddenness that cannot itself be made visible – that world depends on earth, that difference (whether this be Derridean *différance* or the Heideggerian ontological difference or *das Nicht* that *nichtet*) is prior to the ordinary objects we see around us and can never be reduced to such objects – is mistaken too: because the objects upon which the familiar built world stand are simply other built objects, and the places in which we feel at home are supported by other places, quite different from our own but still built ones and thus ones in which familiarity would be in principle be possible too.

We have to give up the idea of finding the ultimate source upon which everything else depends, which means, above all, we have to give up the idea of nature. If I’m above the third story in Manhattan, does the water I drink come from the faucet or from the water main or from the aqueduct or from the reservoir or from the aquifer hundreds of miles upstate -- or does it come from the pump, or the electricity that runs it, or the coal whose combustion produced it, or from the dinosaur whose body turned into that coal, or from the prehistoric plants that dinosaur ate? (And if for some reason you want to give the underground aquifer pride of place, then what about the streams and the rain that fed it originally, and the clouds, their characteristics the result of previous anthropogenic carbon emissions, that made that rain occur?) There is no ultimate source: everything is mediated by everything else. In the urban world, It’s mediations all the way down – and by down I mean (in part) literally down, beneath our feet, under the city. (And if you’re concerned that eventually if one goes deep enough the signs of mediation by human activity disappear, remember that that’s merely true now – we could always go deeper, and always have. And anyway, I was told as a child that if one dug deep enough one would get to China….)

What’s wrong with Leopold’s notion that there’s a spiritual danger to not recognizing the source of one’s food in what he calls “land,” and that one can overcome that danger by returning to that land, is that it treats the mediations that make the objects of our lives possible as secondary and wants to find, underneath them, the immediate – which he identifies with the real or the natural. But even if there were such a thing – even if it weren’t mediations all the way down – still it wouldn’t be clear why the mediations themselves aren’t as important. The point isn’t to trace back the mediations to their “real” source, but rather to realize that wherever we live, city or farm or even underground, whatever “places” we find ourselves in, always depend upon the existence of other places, which in turn depend on other ones, with no places especially privileged as the source or foundation of the others. And all these places, or most of them anyway, are human places, in the sense that usually humans have built them and inhabit them, or at least that we can imagine them being inhabited and in doing so we treat them as “places” and not just locations in space.

There is a critical dimension shared by both the enlightenment and the post-structuralist views that I would not want to give up. It has to do with a critique of forgetting: of failing to recognize the hidden structures and processes upon which our current familiarity depends. The mistake both views make is to treat those structures and processes as somehow other than the ones we do know and see – either hoping (as in the enlightenment view) triumphally to overcome their otherness and bring them finally into the light or (as in the poststructuralist one) getting us to realize that otherness can never be overcome at all. My point has been, however, that the structures and processes upon which the urban world depends are themselves simply other parts of that urban world: that each element depends on other elements and that no part is privileged, not even the element we sometimes call “nature.” The critique of forgetting, in fact, is finally a critique of anything that is claimed to be, or made to be, permanently or systematically hidden – which might perhaps be part of the motivation of those place-hackers I mentioned earlier, whose goal seems to be to break into anything that poses as a black box and reveal it too to be simply another place. The enlightenment idea that anything hidden should be brought into the light is correct – but it must be kept in mind that to light it up always requires something like turning on a switch, and therefore a source of electricity, and so also wires and conduits and power plants and fuel and so forth.

There is another crucial step to the argument I am trying to make here, though in the space I have I can only start to articulate it. For part of the claim that every place depends on other places involves recognizing that places are always human places, and that most of them have been built by humans as well. And so coming to understand the complicated dependencies among those places is also to recognize the role of humans in working to make them come to be. We should not be surprised, I’m saying, to discover that there’s always something to be found under the city, but rather should expect it.[[3]](#footnote-3) The humanness (and builtness) of the places we inhabit, to be sure, should not be privileged either – there are other processes at work in producing those places, like the gravity that directs the water from the reservoirs to the faucets – but it should not be ignored or denigrated either. A common (and normatively powerful) version of the trope that asks us to think about the sources of our food beyond the supermarket involves drawing our particular attention to the animals whose lives are sacrificed to make it possible, and asking us to think about what the consequences of our meat-eating are for them. But if we follow through the twisting labyrinths of the rhizome we might notice another set of animals, human ones, who show up even more constantly at so many of the nodes. Perhaps the most constant dependency each element of the urban infrastructure reveals is a dependency on human labor. The sheer quantity of work needed to build those boilers, to construct those aqueducts, to bore through that rock to produce those sewers, to design and finance and build those massive machines that do the boring – all this is surely something we need to note, and whose significance we need to consider.

There’s no metaphysical privilege to humans in the rhizomatic structure, no doubt: but from the point of view of politics, of justice, and also of morality, there is – because they are, after all, us. We’re the ones who have to decide what to do: what infrastructure to build, what kind of labor to employ, how that labor is to be organized, and above all how those decisions are to be made. We are no more the ultimate “source” of the city – neither aboveground nor below -- than Leopold’s farm is the source of his food. We’re always already in the middle of those dependencies, with the lights already on and the radiator already warming us. But nonetheless we still have to decide what to do, what to build, and how to live. That difficult task is part of what it is to be urban, and for that matter to be human, too.

1. Haydn Washington, *Human Dependence on Nature*: *How to Solve the Environmental Crisis* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 2. Emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In later works Heidegger presents earth as part of the “fourfold” of earth, sky, mortals and divinities, in a suggestive even if finally obscure account that sees us mortals as living between hidden earth below us and visible sky above us, while – in our case – experiencing the divinities precisely as that which we lack. Here world somehow comes to be through the interaction among the four. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *soixante-huitards* of Paris famously said “underneath the paving-stones, the beach,” which is a lovely and even inspiring thought – but “the beach” here must be understood to mean, I think, a different sort of place, still dependent in its own way on a different sort of infrastructure – sandy, perhaps, and gentle, sun-kissed, home to a liberated humanity, and not the hard stones of capitalist domination. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)