DO CLOUDS HAVE POLITICS? REFLECTIONS ON AESTHETIC ENCOUNTER, NATURE, AND POWER

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers contemporary academic discourse concerning the relationship between nature and the political. The main question it addresses is the significance of aesthetic encounter with nature, specifically if and to what extent nature's display can be understood as providing a vantage or connection to something beyond human power relations. It does so by drawing from some reflections in the philosophy of technology and environmental philosophy concerning the nature of the artifactual and the artifactuality of nature. The title itself is derived from Langdon Winner's essay *Do Artifacts Have Politics?* In considering this question, Winner undertakes an analysis of New York City underpasses and can be seen as a precursor to political ecology. This paper will thus consider the limits of a shared understanding within political ecology of nature as inherently and inseparably political. It distinguishes between socially totalizing and socially transcendent views. It incorporates phenomenological reflections and responds to certain key philosophical texts such as Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature,* Eric Katz's criticisms of ecological restoration, Stephen Vogel's *Thinking Like a Mall* and long-standing relevant contemplations ranging from Thoreau to the Tao Te Ching. This topic is increasingly pertinent in an era of climate change and other global environmental crises.

KEYWORDS

Philosophy of Technology, Environmental Philosophy, Political Ecology, Political Philosophy, Nature, Politics, Transcendence, Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

> You look at that river gently flowing by. You notice the leaves rustling with the wind. You hear the birds; you hear the tree frogs. In the distance you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the riverbank. It's quiet; it's peaceful. And all of a sudden, it's a gear shift inside you. And it's like taking a deep breath and going, 'Oh yeah, I forgot about this.'

Thus opens the 2006 documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth* featuring Al Gore.[1] What we find in this reflection is a corruption of the experience of nature: what begins as immersion in peace and beauty ends in a disruptive reminder of the not-immediately-sensed disruptions behind this immediate sensual encounter.

Is a cloud ever just a cloud? Can there be art for art's sake? Or nature for nature's sake?

I had my own aesthetic encounter in southern Iceland in the depths of winter right around solstice. I witnessed stunning winter clouds on my way to explore a glacier—accepting them in honest wonder. After passing through stages of burnt orange, these high clouds morphed into a pure white core shellacked with rainbow fringes on a purplish sky. They were sculpted by high winds into strange, clearly defined—if somewhat blurred—shapes, trailed by ghostly tails spanning their full height. No soft fluffies these. I had neither seen nor even heard of such wonders. I later learned that these are special, usually polar, clouds known as Mother-of-Pearl (or polar stratospheric OR nacreous). They are apparently quite rare, even in the poles, and are formed by "supercooled droplets."[2] I posted photos of them on Facebook soon after.[3]

I largely avoid politics and current affairs on Facebook—at least I did prior to the 2024 reelection of Trump—sparsely interspersing life events and photos with such postings. However, I do occasionally and noticed a pattern. Whenever I posted thoughts or a link to an article, it seemed no one noticed, at least as indicated by superficial markers like likes and comments. But if I posted a picture, it gained traction. Algorithmic befuddery. So, when I posted these cloud photos, I chose to weave political meaning around the clouds as a deliberate provocation and a form of seduction: "In these troubled times," I began, "it's good to remember ... clouds… It's good to look up at the sky, get lost in the beauty of clouds, and forget about all the world's troubles." Before I changed tone: "aren't we destroying the

global atmosphere anyway?! And the sky where clouds live, isn't that where missiles fly? Oh, those pesky wars! And what about that fascist Trump and that word-CLOUD he shared where 'dictatorship' was a central word next to 'power'!!!"[4]

It was this raw experience of the clouds—and my subsequent post—that inspired this article. Can one gaze at a cloud or some other natural object and appreciate its simple beauty without the experience collapsing into Al Gore's ecoanxiety or into the political meanings woven through in my Facebook post? Can we any longer appreciate nature's display as nature? Can there be a beauty beyond politics—beyond the realm of power relations and the battleground of preferences? And why does it matter? Are there no exceptions? And if not, where does that leave us? This is the question framed in experiential-aesthetic terms. The adjacent question is ontological: is nature political?[5]

My persistent interest in the topic is primarily rooted in a disparity between two main approaches to the natural world and our human relationship to it. The first is found in contemporary political ecology and a body of work setting the stage for the coalescing of the discipline, particularly constructivist or deconstructionist approaches in what I call the socially totalizing view; the second in certain key reflections of 19th Century American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau opening what I call the socially transcendent view. This essay will take up this dichotomy, offering initial steps in delineating the limits of political ecology and constructivist thought, relying on clouds as a proxy for this analysis.

THE ARTIFACTUALITY OF NATURE?

Let me begin with this essay's namesake. In a classic 1980 article, philosopher Langdon Winner asked if artifacts have politics. In distinction to the contrary view that things do not have politics but are rather merely neutral tools embedded in social and economic systems of power, he considered "the ways in which [technical things] can embody specific forms of power and authority" by examining tunnels to a beach on the New York coastline, specifically the clearance of Long Island Parkway overpasses. They were designed by the early 20th century city planner, Robert Moses, to allow automobile access but to preclude buses, thus effectively keeping out low income and minority people. Moses' politics were thus effectively baked into the artifact of the parkway. Winner also refers to Parisian thoroughfares and U.S. campus designs of the late 60s, each made

broad and spacious in order to quell protests should they arise. In all these cases, we find "intentions embodied in physical form"—an artifact "designed and built in such a way that it produces a set of consequences logically and temporally prior to any of its professed uses."[6]

An adjacent possibility, Winner notes, are technologies that have certain political dispositions regardless of the designer's political intentions. Many systems, like ships and factories, are inherently more compatible with societies of hierarchical control. Nuclear weapons by their very nature, and nuclear power plants—in their reliance on dangerous fuel that must be tightly controlled—are inherently authoritarian, in turn leading to a broader web of social control.

But what does any of this have to do with clouds? Winner is here considering the politics of artifacts. This begs the question: are clouds artifacts? This is the essence of Bill McKibben's influential essay, *The End of Nature*: climate change, in affecting the globe as a whole, has left human fingerprints on every inch of the earth, particularly the atmosphere. All of nature is thus tainted and subsequently artifactual. And if clouds are artifacts, and we accept Winner's analysis, it therefore follows that they can have politics.

In a sense this is true. The typology, timing, and distribution of clouds are statistically affected by climate change. These specific clouds that I witnessed appeared as they did and when they did in part because of anthropogenic shifts in atmospheric chemistry and temperature. But in another sense, this is false. These exact clouds defy statistics, as statistics merely predicts averages and probabilities, not particularities, while this certain type of cloud formed long before humans ever existed and well before industrial era greenhouse gas pollution of the atmosphere.

Another sense in which cloud-as-artifact is questionable is that these clouds were neither conceived nor designed by anyone, in both their absolute genesis as a latent possibility of the physical world and in their present particularity. Rather, inherent in the cloud is a principle of spontaneity. The cloud forms without conscious interference or directedness. It demonstrates the Taoist principle of tzu-jan or ziran: "of itself, so"—prelinguistic, unconscious, organic, automatic expression—the principle of nature witnessed in growth and decay, flow and flood, and found within our own bodies: "Your hair grows by itself; you do not have to think of how to grow it. Your heart beats

Fig. 1
Earth as Technological Artifact? Image by Chris Dunn.

by itself; you do not have to make up your mind how to beat it." This is wildness. The Tao Te Ching crisply encapsulates wildness thusly: "the Tao principle is what happens of itself"; "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and grass grows itself."[7]

Clouds exhibit spontaneity and wildness even while unintentionally affected, perhaps even quite profoundly, by humans. They are not designed in the sense of technological artifacts, revealing a crucial distinction between intentional design and unintentional affectedness. A thing remains wild when it is not under our intentional control. Consider ice formations on a glass window after a calm frosty night. The glass is an artifact, the ice relies on this artifact for its being, but its process of formation is spontaneous—the ice retains its wildness.

Obviously, a cloud is not "deliberately designed[ed] to achieve a particular social effect" as Winner puts it. Well, not usually. Unless it is seeded to produce rain or injected with sea salt to increase reflectivity. In these cases, a cloud is more obviously an artifact. However, Winner also notes that "to recognize the political dimensions in the shapes of technology does not require that we look for conscious conspiracies or malicious intentions"; and that "many of the most important examples of technologies that have political consequences are those that transcend the simple categories of 'intended' and 'unintended' altogether."[8] He offers the example of the mechanical tomato harvester, which displaced agricultural workers and altered the nature of the tomato. Neither outcome was necessarily what motivated this innovation, however, but were rather followed from the logic of crude efficiency—of cost and production.

Yet, while the social consequences of the tomato harvester may not have been directly intended, the harvester itself was an intentional product of deliberate design. The definitive role of intentionality is thus maintained. Geoengineering however raises further complications. Geoengineering includes techniques such as the injection of sea salt into clouds, and stratospheric aerosol injection with its anticipated side effect of bleached white, rather than blue, skies. Once subject to such techniques, the atmosphere will become an object of deliberate design. If we instead properly design our atmosphere merely through the curbing of greenhouse gas emissions without these technically invasive interventions, would this nevertheless leave us with a global thermostat—a temperature-controlled earth?

Geoengineering and carbon sequestration can be thought of as forms of environmental restoration, each meant to return the atmosphere—or at least approximate its return—to desirable or natural (in the sense of historical) conditions. Philosopher Eric Katz has famously maintained that ecological restoration is a "big lie" in the sense that it necessarily entails artifice and thus produces a technological artifact: "The recreated natural environment that is the end result of a restoration project is nothing more than an artifact created for human use… [T]hey will never be natural-they will be anthropocentrically designed human artifacts."[9] By this logic, the global atmosphere—on the other side of geoengineering—would thus be an artifact. The atmosphere is presently in a state of unintentional collective degradation. Like a devastated and neglected ecosystem, its current state precedes design. Intentionally manipulating the atmosphere through geoengineering, or even deliberately managing the climate through curbing greenhouse gas emissions to a precisely delineated goal like 350ppm of CO2, shifts this state to a new stage: deliberate design (though geoengineering would be a qualitatively more invasive form of design).

The cloud in an atmosphere shaped by geoengineering is thus more artifactual than one in a world in which greenhouse gas emissions have been curbed at their sources to an intentional target. This in turn more than in an atmosphere simply degraded by greenhouse gas pollutants prior to mitigation, with a cloud in an unpolluted sky the least artifactual. There is in other words a gradient of intentionality from the unintentional to the technical. And if we accept Winner's position that artifacts have politics, which I submit we should, then this same set of clouds also reflects a gradient of the political.

Altogether, this reveals a deeper pattern whereby technology converts the natural into the political: as we gain power over a natural entity, it becomes entwined in our social discord. What is accepted and uncontested becomes a new site of power struggle. This can take the form of simple control over a thing or place that was once inaccessible. Certain geographic instances stand out: space was so converted in the Space Race, as were high glaciated peaks along the contested Kashmir border, as well as deep, high, and previously remote seas. This is also revealed in the access to, and ownership of, once inaccessible brainwaves construed as "data."

More profoundly, this expansion of the political realm concerns not simply territorial control of a thing, but a thing's very constitution. Technological innovations opened the possibility of damning rivers, removing or remaking mountains (think West Virginia coal mines or Mount Rushmore), and obliterating or totally remaking ecosystems, opening new battlegrounds for what these things are and should be. Geoengineering, along with hypothetical possibilities such as replacing forests with an equivalent array of direct CO2 capture machines, and other such functional swappings of natural entities for technological ones—when narrowly construed in the terms of equivalent ecosystem services—broadens this pattern to the fundaments of the biosphere.

A primary contemporary frontier for this pattern is the biological unlocking of our bodies and brains, as well as those of nonhuman animals and other organisms. The natural givenness of our body becomes contingent—a new site of contestation. Neuralink and other innovations further the prospects of technological hybridization on the road towards transhumanism. Other technologies such as CRISPR open new means of altering our biological characteristics. Debates around gender, it is worth noting, are often actually debates over technological interventions, for instance hormone replacement therapy. This analysis of course necessitates an acknowledgement that there are legitimately natural things—things with origins and self-directedness apart from us, that technology acts upon in this process of technological politization. But to be clear, this differs from the rightfully problematized faux naturalization of, for instance, hierarchical categories of race and gender.

What this analysis reveals is that the realm of the artifactual has expanded and is continuing to expand, accompanied by the realm of the political in a coupled expansion of the artifactual-political. When the world becomes sufficiently saturated by the artifactual-political, it may appear to many that there is nothing beyond the political—that power and contestation in some sense constitutes the world in its foundations. Thus, whereas I have so far been discussing a shift in the materiality of the world in relation to social and technological machinations, there is a more radical alternative found in political ecology: that clouds not only have politics in this sense of expanded artifactuality, but always and already at their very core—along with everything else—are intrinsically and inseparably political.

THE SOCIALLY TOTALIZING AND SOCIALLY TRANSCENDENT

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in 2005, this was a watershed moment in shifting conceptualizations of the relationship between the political and the natural. It fundamentally challenged the naturalness of a natural disaster, resulting in retrospective headlines including *Why Hurricane Katrina Was Not a Natural Disaster*.[10] This is because—in this analysis—such a storm was perhaps made statistically more likely by climate change, while its effects were amplified by land subsidence and the loss of wetlands due to both altered flows of the Mississippi River and saltwater intrusion from canals dug for oil and gas pipelines, as well as an incompetent federal response and faulty levees. The aftermath was predictably the result of environmental racism and power dynamics. Thus, if Hurricane Katrina was not a natural disaster, then it was an artifactual one—a hurricane being of course nothing more than wind and cloud.[11] This reevaluation, however, still follows the logic of expanding artifactuality: the City of New Orleans was obviously a political artifact in Winner's sense, as was perhaps the hurricane itself in a lesser sense.

There is a trend of thought however that runs much deeper—all the way down in fact. Critical literature often refers to nature—wilderness in particular—as "produced" or as a "construct," meaning, of course, a political artifact. Consider these representative statements; "'Nature' as Westerners know it is an invention, an artefact"[12]; or "nature, like everything else we talk about, is first and foremost an artifact of language"[13]; or in more explicitly political terms: "Space/place can never be seen as apolitical"[14]; or "When we unmask nature, we discover that our social relationships with it are instead social relationships with ourselves, and there is no separate, autonomous nature. Rather than constructing nature… [W]e produce nature through our own social relationships"[15]; or "An environmental philosophy after the end of nature would know that the world is nothing beyond us"[16] or again, "environmental questions are, and can only be, political questions."[17] Foucault insisted on "the ubiquity of the political," when he stated that "power is everywhere,"[18] a position that has been carried forward in Timothy Morton's declaration that "the ontological is political."[19]

These demonstrate an underlying commitment to what I will call a metaphysics of power[20] in which the basic reality and essentially constituting "stuff" of the universe is power stuff, at least in terms of explanatory deference. The political ecologist and their brethren,

the social constructivist—each of them power reductionists—see reflections of power and (in)justice in the cloud and all of nature ("nature" they would say). Critical constructionism is an umbrella term for any of a variety of theories that reduce social and—in their strong, antirealist, form—natural phenomena to power relations. This general stance is critical of essentializing and unequal power relations, yet often silent about or celebratory of technological hybridization and remaking of nature. A softer, though pragmatically equivalent, stance maintains the impossibility of encountering nature beyond culture and thus beyond power in a kind of perverse Kantianism—trapping us behind the veil of an inescapable krato-mena.[21]

This is the socially totalizing view, which denies the possibility of substantively connecting to any socially transcendent force or reality and actively seeks to negate or "unmask" any dissenting view that may leave open the possibility of such connection as pernicious ideology, thereby exposing via deconstruction the ultimate truth of power. In the socially totalizing view, natural beauty and the sublime are thus suspect and potentially subsumed as yet further manifestations of oppression,[22] insofar as such aesthetic encounter transcends social and power relations thereby offering moral perspective—in fact, even more pernicious in seeking to cover their tracks.

There is another possibility, however, which leaves open a space apart from the political, but is not entirely apolitical, as socially transcendent encounter can be a powerful starting point for political critique. This I call the socially transcendent view. Two differing yet foundational variants of this are found in Henry David Thoreau's works. The first comes from one of his most famous essays, *Walking,* or *The Wild*. In it, he calls the walker—a saunterer who rambles freely and constantly across fields and streams, lands under various ownership designations, and in various states of ferality, "a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People." He reflects further:

> Man and his affairs, church and state and school, trade and commerce, and manufactures and agriculture, even politics, the most alarming of them all, - I am pleased to see how little space they occupy in the landscape. Politics is but a narrow field, and that still narrower highway yonder leads to it. I sometimes direct the traveler thither. If you would go to the political world, follow the great road,—follow the market-man, keep his dust in your

> eyes, and it will lead you straight to it; for it, too, has its place merely, and does not occupy all space. I pass from it as from a bean-field into the forest, and it is forgotten.[23]

Thoreau here maintains that there is something more fundamental than the political, which is, in important respects, little more than a dangerous distraction—a distraction that can be escaped in the liminal spaces through which the ultimate outsider, the walker, passes through. Furthermore, I will add, based on my own ample experience of walking the world's far-flung places, that one of the values of spending time apart from society is to gain insights that only distance allows. Away from power struggles, marketing, and unrelenting information, the world gains clarity; the city becomes just another point in the landscape. In silence and solitude, you remember what the world is.

Thoreau's second alternative more firmly draws together this discussion with aesthetics, and offers a possibility, not of distance and respite from the political, but of a point of connection and perspective with powerfully political implications. This is found in his essay *Slavery in Massachusetts*. Thoreau, an ardent abolitionist, was in despair over the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which mandated that citizens of northern states in which slavery was outlawed must aid in the capture of runaway slaves. "Thoreau wrote: 'I cannot persuade myself that I do not dwell wholly within hell.' Seeking to throw off despair, he takes a walk near a swamp he knows well. Suddenly he senses a lily rooted in the muck of history, but rising up as a tiny flower of paradise, sweet in its smell. His despair is modulated." He continues:

> What confirmation of our hopes is in the fragrance of this flower! I shall not so soon despair of the world for it, notwithstanding slavery, and the cowardice and want of principle of Northern men. It suggests what kind of laws have prevailed longest and widest, and still prevail, and that the time may come when man's deeds will smell as sweet. Such is the odor which the plant emits. If Nature can compound this fragrance still annually, I shall believe her still young and full of vigor, her integrity and genius unimpaired, and that there is virtue even in man, too, who is fitted to perceive and love it. It reminds me that Nature has been partner to no Missouri Compromise. I scent no compromise in the fragrance of the water-lily.[24]

This aesthetic encounter reminds Thoreau that injustice does not run all the way down and that our ability to perceive and love nature's beauty discloses an irreducible decency within us. Aesthetics and ethics are here essentially connected, with nature's independent beauty serving as a kind of Archimedean point allowing us to transcend our social condition by reminding us that there is something beyond us, including rightness beyond the happenstance of present circumstance. Not just a reminder, but a visceral experience of sweetness as opposed to cowardice.

Thoreau, and later John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Jack Turner, and others in the tradition of American wilderness philosophy, have sought a kind of foundation for value in the aesthetic of nature.[25] Wilderness is of course not fully and entirely separate from the political, but it does offer among the best opportunities for this sense of otherness and social transcendence. Rachel Carson likewise noted that experiencing the wonder of nature has ethical significance in our treatment of the natural world.[26]

There are however objections to such a move. One of the most important comes from Steven Vogel in *Environmental Philosophy after the End of Nature*. Vogel argues that nature is a superfluous concept born from alienation, is authoritarian when appealed to "as a metaphysically significant category with intrinsic moral implications,"[27] circumvents democratic discourse, is voiceless and silent and thus can only serve as a foil for deception by power-hungry ventriloquists who claim to speak for nature, and, in the sense of nature as unconfined or autonomous process, merely reflects neoliberal free market ideology.

These criticisms of autonomous and socially transcendent nature are mistaken. To be clear, I am all for democratic discourse and adamantly oppose authoritarianism. However, Vogel is simply incorrect to equivocate moral appeals to nature, specifically in the sense of aesthetic encounter—which I have focused on above—with religious appeals to God or fascist appeals to the will of a tyrant. Vogel claims that listening to nature or making moral appeals to nature are authoritarian insofar as these necessitate cowering before "dictates [to which] we must submit unquestioningly" and "allowing something other than oneself to make one's decisions," thus avoiding responsibility.[28] Vogel's descriptions here are laced with rhetorical nonsense and loaded phrasing. Proponents of nature as a moral voice from Thoreau to Abram never speak in the terms of, or intimate,

"submission" or shroud their prose in a fascist aura or admonish us to shirk our responsibilities as thinking citizens. Rather, the experience of nature, as reflected in Thoreau's observations above, offers both a window to peer beyond the oppressive institutions of a given social order and a platform on which to stand to challenge this order. Nature and nature writing are in this sense fundamentally anti-authoritarian.

Furthermore, rational discourse, which is thought by Vogel to be the standard of democratic freedom, is itself fundamentally irrational. Reason is a function of a thinking mind, which is the product of non-rational evolutionary processes and is biological in origin and continuance. Rationality, as envisioned by Vogel and other thinkers of a Habermasian or analytic bent, is an authority that exceeds everyday experience; reason is for them "'supernatural,' meaning something that somehow exceeds or escapes the world of ordinary physical processes."[29] The appeal to reason is ultimately an appeal to nature, but of one sort rather than another. It is just as rational to appeal to nature's poetics derived from prolonged and direct aesthetic encounter as it is to a felt principle of noncontradiction. Appealing to reason as a moral grounding as opposed to some nonrational alternative like nature—in the aesthetic sense I have outlined above—is a matter of preference. And by Vogel's own reasoning, nothing must exceed our preferences. What Vogel fails to appreciate is that there is another way to justify, besides giving reasons, and that is to point: "Look that that," "Go there," "See what it has to teach."

Is accepting the blueness of the sky prior to and without any form of democratic deliberation regarding its color, or getting lost in the shifting beauty of a cloud somehow equivalent to foregoing one's autonomy? Is allowing those experiences to teach one something, appreciating that there might be a kind of wisdom in the workings of nature, equivalent to goosestepping? Of course not. Quite the opposite. This kind of acceptance and ego-transcending is liberating. These experiences offer insights into autonomy: nature reveals itself as self-sufficient in the sense that it flows freely, just as the trillions of cells operating without conscience intervention within our own bodies do, including the brain cells that produce our words and ideas. Bodies and ideas are spontaneously and autonomously forged, in the manner of clouds. Another experiential lesson in autonomy comes from the experience of being in the wilderness. In these places, there is a relative freedom from everyday social constraint coupled with the necessity of preparation and skillfulness necessary to survive and thrive there, though within the ethical limitations of

preserving their beauty and their ability for others to continue to experience them as such. Nature thus offers important lessons in self-determination, a value critical for democracy.

The experience of nature also offers moral lessons such as acceptance and humility—an acknowledgement that there are and always will be limits to our control (both personally and collectively). The experience of nature—the world's wild pregivenness—also opens a door to wonder, wherein philosophy begins. Can tyrants abuse these rightful, natural senses of humility, acceptance, and wonder? Absolutely (in both senses of absolute). But this possibility negates neither these nor the concept of nature. Nature is a fundamental irreducibility of things defining the conditions under which they can fully express their flourishing and beauty within the relative bounds of continuance in retaining their identity, accounting for long-term inevitable flux. Here is what I mean. A human is a highly adaptable, diverse creature, but there are limits beyond which a person (any and all persons) can no longer flourish. Solitary confinement offers an insightful example. It is an affront to human flourishing across time and culture. This reveals an irreducible quality of what it is to be human: human nature. When dammed or poisoned, a river can no longer flourish as river. Things, especially living things, have a basic constitution under which they persist and grow as themselves.

Listening to nature does not mean taking commands from a dictator. Listening to nature rather means that nature can and should inform decision making. Take the analogy of the body. The body is nature incarnate. Listening to the body means understanding it, loving it, and treating it well by responding to it based on the responses you detect from your actions. You will feel better physically and mentally when you are eating right and exercising. What exactly right means however varies somewhat for each person, but it will always follow these basic contours. To know what is specifically right for you necessitates careful attentiveness—listening in other words. You cannot tell your body what is good for it. Listening is in this context, rightfully, unidirectional. Market forces and marketing under capitalism may dictate participating in forms of mass consumption such as highly processed foods, but your body knows better. Listening to it, as a form of nature, is integral to resisting these forces. As is listening to nature in the sense of wild things and places beyond the body. The wisdom of the body also teaches not to overthink things, particularly in the sense of excessively ruminating. Rather, in many situations (but not all), the proper course is to trust your body and

your instincts—allowing yourself to be spontaneous rather than stiff, inhibited, and indecisive. Listening in these senses is liberating.

And while we must care for our body at the macro level, the vast majority of the body's functions are nonconscious and should simply be trusted. Interfering in these processes is generally a mistake, if possible at all. The body is, in this sense, an untrammeled wilderness. That clean air and clean water and certain foods benefit the body is not a question and should not be a question. Seeking to understand and abide by the body's requirements for flourishing is not cowering before authoritarian dictates, but an integral and wonderful part of life. And this understanding can only come from careful attentiveness—listening in other words.

Perhaps some things should not be a question. Perhaps some things should be free from contestation—the political. The blueness of the sky is and should be a given background to human life, not a battleground for justifications and competing visions of color preferences. The right things should be a question, but some things—perhaps most things—should not, though admittedly that line is not always easy to decipher. Vogel argues that there is nothing beyond our preferences. What this fails to appreciate is that our preferences are in important respects grounded in our nature. Moreover, there ought to also be space for that which exceeds our preferences, namely encountering nature.

CONCLUSION

So, do clouds have politics? We should reject the metaphysics of power and the socially totalizing view, while acknowledging the indispensable contributions of a more constrained political ecology. The socially totalizing view eliminates the possibility of the experience of nature as a robust, non-political category, which, as often seen in Thoreau's writings, provides a critical point of resistance towards injustice and tyranny insofar as it offers an outside perspective—a tether to the longer and deeper. Perhaps the political is better understood as a lens that can be applied like so many others, thus surely there ought to be opportunities to take it off? We need not only a political ecology and a science of ecology, but a poetical ecology, which in its intimate attentiveness to nature's boundless beauty provides orientation and clarity about what is real, what is important, and a needed perspective on our social-political world. Perhaps the politically transcendent lies in the silence beyond discourse.

My aesthetic experience of Icelandic clouds as one of awe of wild nature—of the spontaneous, autonomous, and non-produced—retains its importance. While we will probably always to some degree have access to such experiences, the socially transcendent is nevertheless fragile, easily crushed by our cynicism and our greed, but we need it. And to be clear, the desire to infinitely unmask is a deeply cynical impulse.

In addition to recognizing the ontological limits of power, we should seek to limit the reach of technology, starting from the recognition of certain of its tendencies, namely the pattern of expanded artifactualization-politization. Technology—like a transmogrifier fed by an insatiable and inescapable vacuum sucking everything in—is turning the world inside out: the pregiven is becoming the contingent, the accepted is converted into the political, everything becomes a site of contestation and power struggle. Nothing is assumed; everything is social; thus, everything is power. There is "no exit." In such a world, we will all "dwell wholly within hell."

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16 Steven Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature*. MIT Press, 2015.
17 Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 196–97.
18 Johanna Oksala, "Foucault's Politicization of Ontology." *Continental Philosophy Review* 43, no. 4 (2010): 445–66.
19 Timothy Morton, "The Ontological Is Political." *YouTube*. Published September 27, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKrRNK6b4sg.
20 Though I am not the first: "Han's critical claim is that a transcendental reading of the power-knowledge nexus means that, far from being a contingent and historically given configuration, it turns into an independent quasi-metaphysical entity capable of determining the possible forms and domains of knowledge and transforming itself in history. She claims that despite Foucault's explicit denials, secretly there is a metaphysics of power at work in his thought. Power-knowledge becomes an essence definable in itself, returning Foucault to the sort of metaphysics that genealogy sought to combat by giving primacy to perspective and interpretation against any essentialist ontology. While Han acknowledges that the other possibility would be to accept Foucault's explicit description of power-knowledge as an analytic grid, a mere theoretical tool designed to clarify the conditions of acceptability of a system, such acceptance would only land him in even more serious trouble. He would avoid the metaphysics of power, but the problem with a mere analytic grid is that it is deprived of any foundation." See Oksala, "Foucault's Politicization of Ontology," 456–57.
21 *Power*-mena (after phenomena).
22 Critical minded power reductionists might "link the sublime to mesmerizing and subduing political devices"; "In more recent decades… [B]eauty has become suspect… Beauty has in some quarters become bound up in ideology… [T]here is no denying that the veneration of the beauty of nature, which Wordsworth made the fount of his philosophy, has largely ceased to figure in high culture since modernism contemptuously swept it aside…" Michael McCarthy, *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy*. New York: New York Review of Books, 2016. Also, for instance, "In a bus chartered by the organizers of an Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference, the person beside me prepared me for the Grand Canyon as only an academic can. It was a ninety-minute ride from Flagstaff to the South Rim, but it felt much longer. The professor on my right made sure I understood the relation between tourism, post-industrialism, and the commodification of landscapes. It turns out that the Romantics, feeling acute competition with the agents of the Industrial Age, attempted to accrue social capital by becoming experts in their own distinctive enterprise—the manufacturing of beauty and the sublime. The Romantics, I was told, sold the sublime in works of art to an uncouth middle class hungry for the status that accompanies culture and education. I was assured that the only way to escape the spell of the wild and the sublime was to interrogate its bourgeois history. I could hardly wait. And then, in the middle of this private lecture, the brilliant and ineffable Grand Canyon suddenly loomed out the bus window: a staggering wilderness of rock and light rising from the land in one organic surge. A deep silence filled the bus. After that, I didn't hear another word from the professor on my right about producers and consumers of wild beauty." Mark Cladis, "Radical Romanticism and Its Alternative Account of the Wild and Wilderness." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 25, no. 4 (2018): 835–57.

23 Henry David Thoreau, “Walking.” In *The Essays of Henry D. Thoreau: Selected and Edited by Lewis Hyde*. Macmillan, 2002.
24 Henry David Thoreau, “Slavery in Massachusetts.” In *Collected Essays and Poems*. Library of America, 2001.
25 E.g., “Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and not mistake…” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
26 Ted Geier, “Review of *Aesth/Ethics in Environmental Change: Hiking through the Arts, Ecology, Religion and Ethics of the Environment*, edited by Sigurd Bergmann, Irmgard Blindow, and Konrad Ott. *Environmental Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2014): 131–35.
27 Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 236.
28 Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 238.
29 Vogel, *Thinking Like a Mall*, 12.