

# **Matter, Politics and the Sacred**

## **Insurgent Ecologies of Citizenship**

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“Global History enters nature; nature enters history: this is something utterly new in philosophy.”

Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (2003, p. 4)

Gibson-Graham (Gibson-Graham, 2006) urge us to look for the germ of a post-capitalist politics in the incompleteness of the experience of subjection, out of which “the potentiality of becoming” can emerge (23). In bringing this sensibility into the orbit of political ecology, my aim in this paper is to explore what such potential looks like in the context of an extensive conceptualization of both subjection and becoming that reaches beyond human agency. In light of the shift in ontological paradigms that Michel Serres announces, which is also reflected in different ways by other parallel scholarship (Latour, 1993; Swyngedouw, 2004; Whatmore, 2002), what kinds of post-capitalist politics are making themselves evident in the socio-ecological assemblages that Hinchliffe and Whatmore (2009) characterize as “fields of becoming” (108)?

Answering this question requires attention to the ways that matter and non-human life emerge together with human subjects into the sphere of politics. At the same time, however, it demands that we rethink politics itself, since as Latour (2004) argues, the problem of Nature is deeply intertwined with a particular formula for constituting political life (see also Stengers, 2010). Latour suggests that we start such rethinking from a truly blank slate, a “pluriverse” of entities that has yet to be assembled into any coherent collective form. He tells us that the challenge for political ecology is to redefine politics as the set of tasks “that allow the progressive composition of a common world”(53). My approach here is less ambitious, beginning instead in the messy reality of overlapping subjectifications, objectifications and claims to sovereignty that constitute “actually existing” political economies/ecologies.

I use the notion of citizenship as a point of reference for navigating through this actually existing messiness. Citizenship offers a particularly helpful lens through which to appreciate the articulation of subjectivity and political agency, especially at its peripheries where it marks a field of contest between the insides/outside of collectives and the voices/silences that constitute the public spaces of collective deliberation. My approach to citizenship is adapted from Engin Isin’s (2002) notion of citizenship as the condition of “being political”, a state that is constituted always through the relationship between identity and alterity. In this relationship, the identity of citizens emerges in conjunction with the identification of their Others: strangers, outsiders and aliens. Simultaneously, however, Isin asserts that a genealogy of citizenship must necessarily grapple with “moments of political becoming”(33), where the practices of citizenship are actively taken up, reshaped and overturned through the actions and voices of Others, as they struggle to redefine the dominant regime of belonging and collective judgment (276). Conjoining this approach with Holston’s (2008) notion of “insurgent citizenship”, I have previously sought to articulate an approach to ecological citizenship that is particularly attuned to questions of democratic practice and socio-ecological justice (A. Latta, 2009; P. A. Latta, 2007). That same sensibility infuses the present analysis, but here I seek a further reconceptualization, where instead of going looking for insurgent ecological *citizens* my object is to identify *insurgent ecologies of citizenship*. This adjustment in terminology is meant to signal an opening towards the distributed agency in something like Hinchliffe and Whatmore’s (2006) “fields of becoming”, a relationality comprised of both human and “more-than-human” agents (see also Whatmore, 2002). Fundamentally, I am interested in the knowledges, technologies and symbolic orders that permit new kinds of political ecological becoming to assert themselves against and

potentially transform our capitalist civilizational order. As suggested by the title of the paper, I argue that the metaphysical terrain of the sacred reveals itself as an undeniably important technology of human engagement with the agentic capacities of the non-human world as part of these insurgent political ecological becomings.

The empirical focus for this exploration is Latin America, where a host of developments over the past decade present themselves as potential sites from which to ponder the political ecology of Gibson-Graham's post-capitalist potentiality. In particular, I focus on two phenomena of note: the emergence of *buen vivir* as a constitutional innovation in Bolivia and Ecuador, and a continent-wide movement/network devoted to struggles around water. The former points towards the emergence of a new conceptual order for political life that marks a distinct departure from the human/nature divide that underlies liberal democracy. In seeking to identify the implications of this new order, struggles over water allow us to perceive with greater acuity the way that human actors have attempted to enter into dialogue with the material vitality of nature as an active counterpart in defining new political ecological horizons.

### **The Matter of Citizenship**

River, fire, and mud are reminding us of their presence (Serres, 2003, p. 2)

In *The Natural Contract*, French philosopher Michel Serres (2003) seeks to decentre the modernist humanism that casts the earth's biophysical properties and propensities in terms of "the environment", a peripheral reality that forms little more than the stage for the star attraction: human history. By Serres' account, this humanist conceit is at the heart of the Cartesian vision of mastery and possession, where reason rules over matter. As Serres puts it, "our fundamental relationship with objects comes down to war and property" (32). He suggests that this philosophical orientation, along with the societal forms built upon it, are finally engendering a kind of material pay-back, where anthropogenic disruption of natural systems, most notably expressed in climate change, comes to threaten the very survival of the human species. Just as Gibson-Graham locate political possibility in the incompleteness of human subjectification, similarly it would seem that nature's entry into politics comes out of the incompleteness of its objectification. Despite the human attempt at mastery, nature has dramatically escaped the hegemony of human knowledge and now more than ever asserts its active autonomy, *reminding us of its presence*, as Serres puts it. To answer the voices of river, fire and mud, Serres argues that humanity must revisit the divide that Western political philosophy has marked between "the worldwide world of things, the Earth; [and] the worldly world of contracts, the law" (12).

Serres' prescription for addressing the materiality of the planet, which now so forcefully makes itself present, is a "natural contract". The idea of such a contract offers an interesting theoretical framing for exploring the implications of *buen vivir* as a constitutional principle in Bolivia and Ecuador, but before embarking on that analysis I'd like to situate Serres' insights within a broader set of debates about the social and political agency of matter. In what follows, I argue that taking such agency seriously forces us to think in new ways about the interweaving of ecology and citizenship in contemporary movements, resistances and struggles that we would typically characterize with the adjective "environmental".

In turning to the "matter" of nature, this analysis follows other scholars who have named their object as "social nature", "socio-nature" or most recently "technonature", where *nature* and *society* are taken not to be self-evident categories of analysis but rather products of the material and conceptual relationships that they supposedly contain and distinguish (e.g., Bakker, 2004; Bakker & Bridge, 2006; Biersack & Greenberg, 2006; Escobar, 2008; Swyngedouw, 2004). For

instance, in their 2006 article surveying the shifting treatment of matter in geographical work on natural resources, Karen Bakker and Gavin Bridge argue that the dominant theoretical perspectives operative in their discipline over the previous decade—the “production of nature” and the “social construction of nature”—have proven incapable of handling the complex balance of relations between human and non-human worlds that constitute the hybrid spaces, bodies and experiences of *socionature*. A significant part of the problem, they suggest, lies precisely in the fact that scholarship continues to operate according to the universalizing ontological categories of “society” and “nature”, where agency tends to rest principally with the former. Whether nature is understood to be social due to its incorporation within a mode of production *or* due to its construction in discourse, the specific generative properties of biotic and abiotic matter take a back seat to human subjects’ world-shaping endeavours. Bakker and Bridge assert that there are “different modes through which material properties come to have political life”(11), most of which are occluded by the tendency to conceive of agency in terms of subject-object relations. Instead, they propose a relational ontology of materiality, that decentres and destabilizes subjects, objects and other kinds of “permanencies and stabilities”, allowing us to see the way that generative capacities rest on the interaction *between* things rather than in things themselves (16). They conclude that “matter matters, then, because of the way its heterogeneity differentially enables, constrains and/or disrupts the social practices through which resource regulation is achieved” (21).

If Bakker and Bridge offer a reasonably good précis for the shift from the social construction of nature towards a sensitivity to the hybrid and distributed agencies of *socionature*, they also demonstrate one of the tensions in this emerging field of scholarship. Arguably, the analytical sensibilities they display remain significantly indebted to historical materialism, with matter entering politics as a result of its *properties*, which offer a series of constraints and affordances that interact with human social and economic processes. This can be distinguished from an approach where the non-human is conceived in more active terms in its relationship with humans, as for instance articulated by Whatmore (2006), who speaks of “the *co-fabrication* of socio-material worlds” (604, my emphasis) or by Hinchliffe and Whatmore (2009), who articulate an urban ecological politics of *conviviality*. Jane Bennett (2010) moves even more definitively away from the historical materialist tradition, and towards a theorization of the independent agency of matter *vis-à-vis* human society. At the outset to *Vibrant Matter*, she asks, “how did Marx’s notion of materiality—as economic structures and exchanges that provoke other events—come to stand for the materialist perspective *per se*?”(xvi). Drawing on influences such as Spinoza, Nietzsche, Adorno, Bergson, Deleuze and Guatari, Bennett’s approach to materiality trades *objects* with properties for *things* imbued with power, creativity and spontaneity. She remarks upon “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own”(iix). For Bennett, such “thing power” is even more formidable when it comes together in assemblages or confederations that interact/overlap with human collectives, even showing themselves to be partly constitutive of human agency.

I have only brushed the surface of debates about the agency of matter, but for the purpose of the present analysis I am anxious to move into a consideration of how these emerging conceptions of matter’s agentic properties lead us to rethink “the politics of nature” and the now commonplace notion of “environmental” or “ecological” citizenship. Jane Bennett (2010) explores matter’s entry into politics via two key channels. The first is an “ecological”

understanding of politics derived from Dewey and pushed further by drawing on Latour, where “publics” form around specific problems, shaping a context where action is necessarily relational in the way it plays out in ephemeral and conjunctural encounters with a myriad of networked “actants”. While this conception of politics and publics is amenable to the inclusion of non-human others, Bennett argues that it lacks a clear theorization of the communicative basis for the inclusion of non-human voices: “how can humans learn to hear or enhance our receptivity for “propositions” not expressed in words?”(104). In other forms, this is a question which has long preoccupied green political thought. In one example, John Dryzek’s case for a deliberative model of green democracy has at its core a communicative ethic that is intended to bridge the human/non-human divide. He remarks that “...we should listen to signals emanating from the natural world with the same respect we accord signals emanating from human subjects, and as requiring equally careful interpretation” (Dryzek, 2000, p. 149). Dryzek goes on to observe the role of ecological science in translating nature’s signals so that they might be brought into human deliberations.

The problem with this kind of normative theorizing around the question of listening to nature’s “voice” is that it naturalizes the very divide it seeks to cross; nature is considered to lie outside politics, with only human efforts capable of rendering its signals political. This same kind of approach also informs much of the contemporary literature on environmental citizenship, which by and large seeks a “greening” of citizenship, so that in theory and practice it begins to take ecological challenges into account (Barry, 1999; Bell, 2005; Dobson, 2003; Valencia Sáis, 2005). Here again, the aim is to remedy nature’s a priori *absence* from politics. However, as noted at the outset of this analysis, the ontological exclusion of nature from the human is actually *internal* to the constitution of political life. In other words, a certain narration of humanity’s emergence and differentiation from nature provides the foundation for Western political thought. At the same time, the insights explored here about matter’s capacity for agency would suggest that matter/nature has in fact always been *materially* present in human politics, despite its ontological disavowal. The challenge, then, is not so much to *bring matter/nature in* as it is to revisit the ontological dualism between human and nature in order to reorient politics to the material immanence that already infuses it.

Bennett’s second basis for theorizing the way matter becomes political offers some clues about how to begin rethinking politics in order to take this material immanence seriously. She turns to Rancière’s notion of disruption in order to construct a new theory of the communicative basis whereby matter’s vitality comes on to the political register. For Rancière, disruption is the fundamental mechanism by which the essence of politics—which he identifies as the fundamental equality of speaking beings—is reasserted by the demos against the creeping privilege of some voices over others. Bennett would have us loosen up the definition of speech in order to accommodate matter’s co-presence with humans in the political domain. To do this she highlights the aesthetic dimension to Rancière’s theorization of political life. He refers to the principle that governs the inclusivity of the public sphere as the “partition of the sensible” or the “regime of the visible” (quoted in Bennett, 105). It is the placement of this partition that shapes patterns of inclusion/exclusion, and which becomes reconfigured when marginal “voices” materialize in events that transgress their invisibility.

This sense for matter’s ability to become political through disruption and transgression can be augmented by Braun and Whatmore’s (2010) attention to the performances of things, along with their suggestion that things are “eventful”. While their commentary is particularly directed toward the study of more obviously technological artifacts rather than, say, hurricanes or

endangered species, the point that matter can engender events is broadly applicable to understanding the technonatural distribution of agency across assemblages comprised of human and non-human capacities for agency. For Braun and Whatmore the eventfulness of things marks an essential indeterminacy, signalling the existence of “emergent properties” that “bedevil political calculation” (xxiii). Following Latour, they argue that these characteristics of things allow them to generate “matters of concern” that call humans into knots of publicity. These knots or spaces of publicity, sparked by the power and eventful indeterminacy of things, are in fact all around us: as public health concerns over viruses, mould and smog; as protests over sour gas in groundwater near shale gas operations; as high-profile trials over gene drift in canola fields; as European lobbies to black-list oil from the Alberta tar sands; and as debates in CITES sparked by the emotional tug of disappearing things like the polar bear or the bluefin tuna.

In all these cases, matter and humans are interwoven in relations that are at once material and political. In this sense, politics and citizenship are always already “ecological” in the sense that citizenly engagement can hardly be untangled from the matters of concern that engender it. Nevertheless, it is crucial to take note of the *way* that matter or nature is articulated within political life, since different alignments of humans and things have divergent implications for the future unfolding of those socionatural assemblages. Arguably things, like humans, are susceptible to different kinds of symbolic, discursive and legal codings, practices and technologies that render them more or less visible and active within the spaces of political ecological assemblages or assemblies. The force of things refracts differently into matters of concern depending, for instance, on whether it passes through the socio-ecological technologies of property, resources, wilderness or commons.

If each of these socio-ecological technologies represents a different form of Rancière’s “partition of the sensible” in the sense that Bennett deploys the concept, then each assigns certain meanings and occludes others, rendering alternately dominant or marginal the divergent ways in which elements in a particular socionatural assemblage constitute their political being. Similarly, the eventful transgressions or insurgences of marginalized thing-ness, connected to the assertions of voice by those human actors who are in a position of alterity vis-à-vis the dominant regime of citizenship, mark moments of political becoming that are at once human and more-than-human. These moments are what I call *insurgent ecologies of citizenship*. In the next two sections of this analysis, I probe two such insurgent ecologies in order to elaborate upon this socionatural conception of citizenship.

### **Ecuador’s Natural Contract: the insurgent ecologies of *buen vivir***

Henceforth, men come back into the world, the worldly into the worldwide,  
the collectivity into the physical....Back to nature then! (Serres, 2003, p. 38)

In response to the manifest response of natural systems against the war waged on the planet by human kind, Michel Serres proposes the need for contract between humans and non-human nature, something analogous to the hypothetical social contract that in the founding political philosophy of the West (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, etc.) was understood to have given birth to society. It is important to note that Serres’ vision is not about retooling a social institution to resolve a new kind of problem. Rather it is his aim to remedy, at long last, the errors of thinking in that original social contract.

Strangely silent about the world, this contract, they say, made us leave the  
state of nature to form society. From the time the pact was signed, it is as if

the group that had signed it, casting off from the world, were no longer rooted in anything but its own history. (Serres, 2003, p. 34)

As a result of this casting off, nature was left “distant, mute, inanimate, isolated” (35). In particular, Serres underlines that nature was excluded from “publicity”, that which we identify in the shared human collective of a particular polity as the space of common life. In this space, which we might identify as the “inside” of citizenship, Serres asserts that “nature is reduced to human nature” (35). Nevertheless, as we have already seen, this exclusion is untenable, and nature pushes back. Indeed, faced with human aggression the biosphere is far from mute, but rather resists its objectification: “nature behaves as a subject” (36). The natural contract that Serres prescribes as remedy to the failings of the social contract would rest on a core commitment to symbiosis and reciprocity, “for a symbiont recognizes the host’s rights, whereas a parasite—which is what we are now—condemns to death the one he pillages and inhabits” (38). It can of course be objected that nature, unlike humans, lacks the communicational ability to enter into a contract, even on the kind of hypothetical terms that the social contract is imagined to have provided the basis for human society. Yet as Serres’ argues, nature need not use language for its subjectivity to be registered as a contractual counterpart to humanity: “...the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that’s enough to make a contract. Each of the partners in symbiosis thus owes, by rights, life to the other, on pain of death” (39).

Serres’ proposal might have seemed far-fetched when it was first published in 1992, but twenty years later the world has borne witness to constitutional experiments that would seem to embody the essence of that proposal. In 2008 and 2009 respectively, Ecuador and Bolivia approved new constitutions that had been designed through extensive processes driven by constituent assemblies. These assemblies were unprecedented for the way they brought previously marginalized voices into the construction of a shared basis for political collectivity. In particular, both the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions are the product of social movements driven by indigenous peoples and peasant farmers. In Bolivia the Aymara people, particularly Aymara coca growers, were a fundamental political force, also joined by lowland indigenous populations in the refounding of Bolivia as a “plurinational” state. Meanwhile, in Ecuador, a broad coalition of indigenous groups, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), was instrumental in opening up the political space for constitutional transformation.

In different ways, both countries’ constitutions invoke the concept of *buen vivir* or “living well” as a guiding principle. This is a new paradigm for Western constitutionalism, but a notion with deep roots in the indigenous cultures of the Andean peoples. In Bolivia *buen vivir* is used primarily as a Spanish translation of the Aymara concept *suma qamaña*, while in Ecuador its indigenous referent is the Quechua principle of *sumac kawsay*. What the constitutional deployment of *buen vivir* draws from both traditions is a preoccupation with well-being that is both communitarian and biocentric. In the latter respect the concept draws the broader environment into considerations of rights, obligations and good government, where individual citizens are conceived as nested within broader human collectives and biospheric communities. As Gudynas (2011) describes it, *buen vivir* would seem to embody the remedy that Serres has called for: “Buen Vivir promotes the dissolution of the Society – Nature dualism. Nature becomes part of the social world, and political communities could extend in some cases to the non-human” (445).

Following Gudynas, it is important to distinguish between the ways that *buen vivir* makes its way into the constitutions of these two Andean nations. In Bolivia *buen vivir* is set out as a

guiding principal defining the role of the state, whereas in Ecuador it takes shape as a series of rights, as well as a set of principles for the “development regime”. While my discussion here is in some sense relevant to both cases, my empirical focus is on Ecuador. This is partly because intellectuals within Ecuador, some of whom were also involved directly in the constitutional process, have made particularly important contributions to the debate about the significance of *buen vivir*. But my interest in Ecuador also arises from a further difference between the two constitutions. Where Bolivia’s offers strong protections for citizen’s rights to a healthy environment, only Ecuador’s constitution articulates *rights of nature*. Article 71 opens the enumeration of these rights, stating that “Nature, or *Pacha Mama*, where life is reproduced and realized, has the right to integral respect for her existence and the maintenance and regeneration of her vital cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes” (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008).

This recognition of nature as a rights-bearing subject, along with the broader conceptual framework provided by *buen vivir*, has significant implications for the future shape of economic development. While in Article 74 it is recognized that nature’s rights must be balanced with citizens’ rights to make use of the country’s “natural riches” for their own well being, Article 72 guarantees nature’s right to restoration from damage caused by such use, independent of any restoration required to address harm to individuals or communities. Nature’s ability to make legal claims based on its rights is necessarily indirect: the constitution grants legal standing to individuals and communities who wish to defend those rights. As such, the rights of nature open the way for new forms of legal recourse with direct implications for how economic development unfolds. Perhaps even more consequential, however, is the way the constitution’s elaboration of *buen vivir* reworks the very notion of development. Article 275 outlines seven principles that are to guide a reorientation of the development regime, steering it towards the fundamental aim of realizing human capacities and quality of life through the application of principles such as solidarity, participation and decentralization. Development is to be realized in harmonious coexistence with nature and the benefits are to be distributed in an egalitarian manner. In the first *National Plan for Buen Vivir* released in 2009, the spirit and substance of the new constitution is further explored, demonstrating even more clearly the extent of the shift in thinking that *buen vivir* entails. Indeed, the *Plan* engages in a thoroughgoing critique of development that includes a rotund rejection of the guiding lights of “modernization” and “progress”. Explaining the importance of generating new conceptual tools out of the traditions and knowledge of the Global South, the *Plan* asserts that,

...we are no longer talking about economic growth, nor GNP; we are talking about the broad relationships between humans, nature, community life, the ancestors, the past and the future. The objective that brings us together is no longer “development” from the old perspective of linear history, but rather the construction of the society of Buen Vivir. (República de Ecuador, 2009, pp. 32-33)

Without a doubt, *buen vivir* has been employed in Ecuador as much more than just an environmental supplement to an otherwise conventional constitutional order. In fact, as Magdalena León (2010) notes, *buen vivir* provides conceptual unity across the constitution, addressing a series of issues that the constitutional process sought to resolve. Ecuadorian Sociologist Rafael Quintero (2009) calls it the constitution’s “organizing paradigm” (82). As such, *buen vivir* is broadly transformative in its implications. Indeed, it has been framed as a “civilizational” alternative (See, for example, the contributions to León, 2010). Along these



lines, Escobar (2011) associates *buen vivir* with a broader set of “transitional discourses” that mark “ontological struggles” pointing far beyond conventional understandings of the shifts in priorities typically associated with sustainable development.

To return to the theoretical framework outlined in the first part of this paper, the ontological realignment brought about by *buen vivir* can be understood as a process of becoming political, where the transgressive and disruptive qualities of matter ally themselves with human alterity as insurgent ecologies of citizenship. It might be objected that this process of becoming is far more human than non-human, but that is only if we decontextualize the voices and actions of Ecuador’s indigenous peoples and their non-indigenous allies. Those voices and actions are informed by cosmovisions shaped by millennia of material relationships of subsistence and communion between human and non-human spheres, which has been subsequently modified, adapted and sharpened by the socio-ecological devastation associated with colonial and neocolonial practices of resource extraction. Such cosmovisions form a kind of conduit for nature’s co-insurgency within the concept of *buen vivir* in the new Ecuadorian constitution. At the same time, the constitution – as a kind of natural contract – represents a creative hybridization of Western and New World ontologies. As Ecuadorian economist Quirola Suárez (2009) argues, it is the product of a collective process of learning and unlearning in order to combine ancestral and modern knowledge in the spirit of transformative change (107).

The importance of indigenous cosmovisions to the principles expressed in Ecuador’s constitution points toward another dimension in these insurgent ecologies of citizenship whose significance is not entirely captured in the notion of a contract: spiritual belief and other engagements with the sacred. In most ways the Ecuadorian constitution uses secular terms to capture the interdependence of human and more-than-human elements. For instance, it speaks of “respect for all the elements that form an ecosystem” (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008, Art. 71) and “harmonious coexistence with nature” (Asamblea Constituyente, 2008, Art. 275). And yet the document also speaks of “*Pacha Mama*”, an undeniable reference to a non-Western spiritual conception of nature. As Quirola Suarez (2009) suggests, *buen vivir* “posits a cosmovision of harmony between human communities and nature, in which human beings are part of a community of persons, which in turn is a constitutive element of Pachamama or mother earth herself” (p. 105, see also Benalcázar, 2009). Quintero (2009) is even more explicit in highlighting the spiritual dimension, noting that for indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian cultures a perception of “symbiosis between the natural and the supernatural” formed the moral basis for their involvement in the development of the new constitution (83). According to Quintero, proclaiming the rights of nature is for these actors inseparable from proclaiming the sacred character of their traditional territories (84).

Theories of citizenship are not well equipped to make sense of these links between the material, the political and the sacred. To begin to flesh out a way of understanding what is at stake in these connections, I turn now to consider insurgent ecologies of citizenship from a more specific and empirically fine-grained perspective, centred on Latin American struggles for water justice.

## Life and the Sacred: Probing the “Spirit” of Water Justice

...we may have to face the eventual demands of beings that were comfortably put away as creatures of human imagination....Beings that were excluded as speculative make their comeback, and we no longer have the appetite or the criteria of the censor to keep them at bay. (Stengers, 2010, p. 4)

In a 1998 commentary critiquing David Harvey's *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Harvey, 1996), Laura Pulido (1998) takes her fellow social scientists to task for distancing themselves from questions of spirituality. In particular, she challenges Harvey for his off-hand dismissal of a 1991 declaration emerging from the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, a key event in the emerging tide of environmental justice activism in the United States. The declaration, *Principles of Environmental Justice*, echoes some of the principles now located in the Ecuadorian constitution, but goes even further in making specific reference to the sacredness of Mother Earth. Pulido notes that Harvey is undoubtedly not alone in feeling discomfort at finding the sacred mixed up with more secular political claims for rights, justice and democratic process. Indeed, she highlights the tendency across the social sciences to celebrate the social and political achievements of key historical figures (e.g. Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez) without acknowledging the key role that spiritual convictions and discourses played in their political action. As Isabelle Stengers (2010) argues, excluding supernatural beings and forces from consideration as we expand our ontology of the political to include non-human others threatens to “leave outside the concerns of all humans, both individuals and populations, who *do* know that Gods, djinns, or the Virgin Mary matter” (4).

Such exclusionary implications are one reason to take spirituality seriously when it appears interwoven in the discourses of insurgent ecological citizenship. Nevertheless, it would seem that Pulido is in fact asking for something more than non-discrimination for political arguments anchored in the supernatural. Rather, she asks, “what is the role of spirituality in creating transformative social change?” (p. 719). Without claiming to exhaust possible answers to this question, one key role of spirituality would seem to be as a cultural technology that mediates between humans and the material agency of the more-than-human. Against dominant partitions of the sensible world, spiritual experience and discourse offer a powerful channel for disruptive assertions of socionatural agency, potentially prompting transformative changes in the political ecologies of citizenship. This is demonstrated in the case of the Ecuadorian constitution, where indigenous cosmovisions informed a radical ontological innovation embodied in the concept of *buen vivir*, opening the way for human actors to interpret and respond in new ways to the rich interrelations of the assemblages in which they are embedded. This kind of spiritually informed socio-ecological insurgence pushes back against the domination of Western objective technical knowledge, which has long been coupled with the instrumentalist anthropocentric thinking that casts out the sacred and similarly marginalizes aesthetic and affective dimensions, converting the vibrant tapestry of human-nature relationships into a calculus of use and market value.

It might seem that this argument is headed for a simplistic and nostalgic plea for the re-enchantment of nature. Rather, following Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005), I suggest the idea that there is a nature to re-enchant is a symptom of the problem rather than the solution. According to Szerszynski, “nature” emerged in the West not through a simple process of secularization, but rather through a complex interaction between an evolving religious tradition and an emerging scientific/technological knowledge regime. In this interaction, the progressive evolution towards

an eventually “transcendent divine” facilitated the emergence of both society and nature as profane realities amenable to scientific understanding and manipulation. At the same time, we might say that the ontological structure provided by transcendence came to shape “secular” responses to the alienating experience of earthly profanity. The environmental movement’s appeal to a sublime notion of wilderness is thus only a mirror image of its profanity. Similarly, humanity’s turn to the miracles of technology in search of both meaning (actualization of self) and salvation (preservation of life) have made it the object a kind of messianic hope. In particular, Szerszynski highlights the way that the dynamic reversal of a transcendental sacral order gave birth to biopolitics and its preoccupation with the cultivation and administration of life itself (p. 58). In this way, it is a particular kind of *spiritual* ordering that gives us both nature and human life as objects of concern, protection, management and optimization.

In light of these insights, what Szerszynski seeks in response to the ecological tribulations of our contemporary global biotechnological order is a re-ordering of the sacred to remedy the tension between transcendence and profanity. “Nature” is not to be re-enchanted, but Szerszynski is certainly looking to bring the sacred back down from the heavens (and from the secular facsimiles of the heavens: politics, science, technology) for its reinsertion into everyday human and non-human being. What is fascinating about his suggestive discussion of possible paths for this re-ordering is that it takes him into the same territory that forms the basis for preoccupations about non-human agency. Seeming to echo the thesis presented by Serres, Szerszynski suggests that human action in the shape of technology and its unanticipated consequences “incites nature itself into action-hood”, arguing that “it must be the task of any new sacral ordering of nature to help us make sense of such experiences...” (p. 177). Following Ingold, he notes hopefully “the resurgence of a more animic relationship with nature, one characterized by a greater sense of agency in non-human nature, and a more porous understanding of the human-non-human boundary” (p. 177). Szerszynski looks to “primal cultures” as one fertile source for more embedded understandings of human relationships with non-human others, but he is equally convinced that the present conjuncture requires us to reach for other innovative ways of rethinking the sacred. This recovery of an embedded notion of the sacred provides an important tool for thinking about how the material agency of socio-ecological assemblages becomes channeled into politics. Just as the approach to citizenship I employ in this analysis seeks not to *bring nature in* but rather to collapse the nature/politics divide, the notion of the sacred to which Szerszynski appeals is one that rejects the material/supernatural divide that informs Western religious traditions; we might say that it aims to recover *the materiality of the sacred* and the *sacred qualities of matter*.

To explore the utility of this ontological realignment I suggest we turn to Latin American struggles around water, which have come to lie at the centre of protracted social and political conflict. Interestingly enough, the “Rights of *Buen Vivir*” in the Ecuadorian constitution begin with the right to water, making explicit reference to the fact that it is “essential for life” (Art. 12). Water is indeed materially indispensable for the sustenance of human (and other) life. Its material properties not only allow it to circulate oxygen and nutrients within human (and other) bodies, but also to transport contaminants through ecological systems, hence connecting pollution sources to exposed bodies. Water cleans but also poisons, irrigates but also inundates, transports but also floods and destroys. For all these practical material reasons it makes a great deal of sense that water be identified as essential to life in a national constitution. Nevertheless, I suggest that these factors do not exhaust explanations of the significance of the link between water and life. Life, after all, lies at the heart of the sacred, even if the latter points beyond the existence of

material living bodies. It is the fecundity of life-giving processes that indigenous peoples identify with the energy of the Pacha Mama, and the Judeo-Christian tradition identifies God with a power over the genesis of life and over the soul's eventual passage into afterlife. While the latter tradition has, as Szerszynski suggests, set the ontological stage for a preoccupation with mere life in the form of biopolitics, we will see in a moment that there remains an impulse within it that aligns closely with a more primal conception of life as embedded in a matrix of vital material relationships that are simultaneously earthly and sacred.

Red VIDA (LIFE Network) is a network of Latin American activists comprised by unions, NGOs and community organizations, dedicated to the fight for water justice. In a 2009 publication "Luchando por la VIDA" (Castro Villegas & Hurtado C.), activists from across the network describe their experiences of the battle for water rights and their visions for a more just distribution and administration of water resources. Their testimonials demonstrate a preoccupation with the defense of individual and collective rights to water in the face of privatization, pollution and state mismanagement of water resources. What is striking is that this preoccupation for the political economy of water is closely accompanied and indeed shaped by a concern for the "the culture of water", as one Argentinian activist puts it in the title of his short essay. Guillermo Amorebieta (2009) argues that an ancestral cultural tradition of harmony and respect between humans and nature needs to be recovered. "Beyond the necessity of adopting technologies to guarantee universal access to water and to have more influence in politics, we also need to return to the culture of water where water is the fundamental part of being human" (49). Probing this concern further, we find other activists similarly talking about the unique character of the human connection with water, invoking the need for fundamental changes in values to revive a culture of reverence for the connection between water and life. A Mexican activist speaks of the movement rescuing not only physical lands and environments, but also traditional ways of thinking, linking the defense of water to a particular way of giving meaning to life (Roque Morales, 2009). An Uruguayan activist speaks of the special role of women in defending water as a defense of life, describing the representation of a baby in a womb inside a drop of water as the symbol for her organization (Marquisio, 2009). In a final example, an Ecuadorian activist talks about water as itself alive and in need of care from activists who take up the Quechua identity of *yakukamas* or "caregivers of the water" (Martines, 2009, p. 53). For these activists the link between water and life is much more than merely biological, resonating also in symbolic, moral and spiritual dimensions.

It is precisely the way in which water's material relationship with life seems to spill over into other dimensions that enables the particularly powerful socio-ecological assemblage of citizen insurgency that Red VIDA represents. Water is not merely the object of struggle for this movement, but also a kind of ally or co-combatant, its properties and agency shaping the very modes of organization and symbolic construction of the struggle. As one example, in El Salvador the campaign for water rights is called "Blue Democracy" and activist Ana Gómez asserts that "the right to water has to do also with a right to citizenship", underlining a call for public-community partnerships for administration of water resources (Gómez, 2009). Like Gómez, Juan Pablo Martines (2009) looks to partnerships between the state and communitarian organizations – in this case *juntas* of local water users – for novel ways to manage water resources in Ecuador. In these examples, democracy is reimagined in ways that reflect water's material insertion into human communities, rather than its objectification within technical and bureaucratic systems or its reification as property and commodity. This makes the call for a new culture of water

synonymous with the struggle for a new culture of democracy and citizenship, which moves beyond state/private models.

Simultaneously, water's material properties percolate into the imagination of the movement, shaping its discursive construction of activism as political practice. As Martines describes the political activism of the *yakukamas*: "we try in what we do to be like the water, to move, to oxygenate our ideas and proposals..." (53). Similarly, Ernesto Reyes (2009) of Honduras draws upon fluid metaphors to describe his vision for that country's water movement: "we need this power [to make water our human right] to be born from the communities and to overflow the pitchers and to overflow the banks of the rivers or of the towns" (37). Flows of water and flows of political subjects are intertwined in this call to action, which makes water the pivot point for a movement calling not just for a right to water but also for "...a new way of life for our peoples, and of course, a new model of social power, of communitarian power, of popular power" (38).

*Luchando por la VIDA* offers a partial window on the way that water's material and symbolic properties play into broader insurgent ecological assemblages, meanwhile providing a sense for the way that water as LIFE depends in part on spiritual or quasi-spiritual modes of experiencing and relating human-nature interrelation. For a fuller appreciation of the way that the sacred helps mediate material relationships between human and non-human, I turn to look in more detail at one corner of the Latin American water movement with which I have more direct experience: the movement for water rights in Chile. Centred around a network called the *Coordinadora por la Defensa del Agua y la Vida*, the movement is comprised of environmental NGOs, rural water committees, churches, water and sanitation workers' unions, and indigenous communities. On its web page it proclaims a collective project of returning water to public control and insuring its sustainable management in the face of increasing pollution and scarcity (Coordinadora). While this public face of the movement makes no particular reference to water's symbolic or spiritual significance, the September 2009 meeting of activists across Chile that marked its beginnings was deeply imbued with a widely shared veneration for water as something much more than a resource in need of careful management. This view, which emphasized water's life-giving properties but also pointed towards different kinds of spiritual belief, was articulated amongst the activists as a direct response to the dominant culture's treatment water as an object of technical management and as a commodity. On the second day of the meeting this shared sentiment about the need for a change in the culture of water came into focus as an intriguing ceremony. The event began with activists presenting containers of water they had collected from their communities, describing it in terms of its qualities (polluted, scarce, still pristine, etc.) as well as the struggles around it. These waters from all corners of the country were then poured into a common bowl, and in a series of rites involving a syncretic combination of Mapuche, Aymara and Catholic influences the mixture of waters was blessed. Following this, participants in the conference, including observers such as myself, were anointed on the forehead with this water, now transformed from mere H<sub>2</sub>O into a liquid heavy with symbolic connection to a diversity of socio-ecological struggles and with spiritual significance as a sacred substance.

The Santiago water ceremony was fascinating for the way it brought human-water relationships into the heart of a political meeting through a shared experience of water's material presence. Meanwhile, though indigenous articulations of the spiritual significance of water are perhaps less surprising, the enactment of a broadly inclusive ceremony with the participation of the Catholic Bishop of the Aysén Region, was undoubtedly of special significance. In a country

with a deeply ambiguous relationship to its strongly Catholic heritage, the Bishop of Aysén, Luis Infanti de la Mora, has become a contentious figure for the way he has employed his office in defence of the rivers of his diocese, which are slated for hydroelectric development by the HydroAysén corporation. His 2008 pastoral letter *Give us this Day our Daily Water* (Infanti de la Mora) brought the Catholic Church into the orbit of a multi-sectoral movement to keep Chilean Patagonia free of dams; it also put Infanti on the map as one of Latin America's adherents to a "green" version of liberation theology. Notably, it is water's special properties as a material substance at the heart of Catholic ritual that facilitate Infanti's powerful intervention in the debate over HidroAysén. While the sacral order of Christianity rests on a transcendent God contrasted with a profane material world, baptism bridges divine and earthly planes, where water in the hands of priests holds powers to cleanse the soul. The mystical properties of holy water make the Bishop of Aysén a "natural" ally of the rivers' emergence as manifestations of God's will on earth *and* as political matters of concern.

Through Infanti's involvement in the movement for water rights in Chile the mainstream culture's relationship to the usually more marginal voices of deep ecologists and indigenous peoples has been altered. A new kind of common ground for reconsidering the significance of water has been opened up, shifting the ground of political debate and injecting new kinds of energy into insurgent ecologies of citizenship that seek ways of overcoming the dominant capitalist order of socio-natural exploitation.

### **Conclusion: Material, Spiritual and Political Ecologies**

If we follow Gibson-Graham in looking for the emergence of a post-capitalist politics from the incompleteness of capitalist modes of subjection, then I suggest a political-ecology of post-capitalist citizen insurgency also has to find ways of building alliances with the incompletely objectified matter of non-human nature. A natural contract offers one way of doing this, and the constitutional experiments in Bolivia and Ecuador deserve further study as alternate models of socio-ecological assemblage. Nevertheless, we must also pay close attention to the generative impetus for the articulation of such alternatives and for their actualization in practice. In this respect, the ongoing "eventful" or "disruptive" insurgence by socio-ecological alterity demands our attention as theorists of political possibility. Understanding environmental "matters of concern" in terms of the emergent properties of socio-nature requires an ontological flexibility to the numerous ways that peoples and natures *become political*.

In Latin America, insurgent ecologies of citizenship frequently arise in ways that are closely tied to the cultural politics of indigenous cosmovisions as well as other traditions that appeal to the sacred as a way of expressing human embeddedness in material ecological processes. Quite apart from its strategic importance as a discursive element in the cultural politics of hegemony and counter-hegemony, the sacred presents a vital space of experience and representation, within which the abstract notion of assemblage is embodied in cultural and material practice. In this way, water's partial passage into the sacral register is significant not because there is a higher truth in some kind of spiritual order, but because of the way that spiritual articulations of meaning and modes of relation permit human actors a richer way of interacting with this material substance in its various forms, and of making political claims against actors who claim water as property and seek its objectification within circuits of capital accumulation. Similarly, Quechua and Aymara cosmovisions offer ways that ordinary insurgent citizens can put *buen vivir* into practice as embodied engagements with the emergent properties of their ecological surroundings, and simultaneously as a mode of human-non-human solidarity in the search for alternate socio-ecological futures.

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