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Postmodern *Oikos*

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This chapter focuses on the potential of the family household to act as a powerful teaching, learning, and sociopolitical site of environmental education and sustainable development. The ways in which families function in the intimacy of the home provide important pedagogical insights into the ethical and political renewal urged by critics of the current environmentally problematic human condition. To develop these ecologically framed pedagogical insights and their potential for a praxis of an intergenerational environmental ethics and ecopolitics, I focus on aspects of moral, social, and ecological “otherness” allegedly missing in modernity’s and postmodernity’s accounts of and complicity in the socioenvironmental predicament we now unavoidably confront in the “everyday.”

The postmodern *Oikos* anticipated here methodologically revisits aspects of the ancient Greek *Oikos* (environmental home/economic household, as a dominant mode of material and social relationships) so as to add historical meaning to my recent studies of “green” households (Payne, 2005a, 2005b). Of particular intrigue in these empirical studies was how the home might act “ontologically” as a “primal” and “proximal” site of moral, social, and ecological *being, doing, belonging, dwelling, placing, and becoming*. The *Oikos* of ancient Greece seemed to provide an “ideal” reference point from which to “story” the future via these studies. The privacy and intimacy of (green) family households also seemed to provide for inquiry an exemplary “other” site of ethical and sociopolitical resistances to the consumerist, entertainment, and individualistic imperatives of postmodernity. This complex postmodern configuration is an ontological and epistemological condition in which so many young people are trapped (Kenway & Bullen, 2001) even as they are the next generation in whom we place our hopes for a more sustainable future. Hence, the storying of an *Oikos* is a pragmatic type of philosophizing that is phenomenological, practical, ethical, and political. It reflexively weaves empirical findings with theoretical development and philosophical musings, and is (re)presented here as a “hybrid paper” (Reid & Scott, 2006, p. 584). Lessons learned from the *Oikos* about various domestic forms of ecopedagogy and ecopraxis might inform inquiry into, and application in, a wide variety of settings—including in the classroom, work place, community; or in the theorizing of social ecology (Payne, 2005a, 2005b).

The historically based dialogue of the past, present, and future *Oikos* and their ontological underpinnings ended up involving a less idealized and more critical return to a materialist and political conception of how some classical Greek households might have functioned “ecologically.” Reference to the *primal* and *proximal* in (re)storying (environmental) education picks up on philosophical propositions about the *a priori* status in the family household and its social, moral,





and ecological dimensions—offered respectively in the writings of Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, and John Sanders, but “read through” the empirical zoom lens of the “best resistance” family ecopedagogies and praxis just mentioned.

POSITIONING THE POSTMODERN OIKOS: SOME HISTORICAL, CRITICAL, ONTOLOGICAL, AND METHODOLOGICAL SIGNPOSTS

At the heart of this hybrid-like conversation¹ is my interest in identifying the enabling pedagogical and praxical conditions from which the desirable ecological subjectivities and physical and psychosocial relations nurturing human agency and environmental praxis might flourish.

The term *postmodernity* is qualified by the notion of globalism in the section titled “Constitutive Abstraction.” Postmodernity often refers to a globally dominant, technologically mediated, and economically driven condition where time and place are “collapsed” with a range of implications for asking who we are, what we know, and how we act and interact. Consumption, materialism, and markets are elevated in significance from their modernist origins, masquerading via hard and soft technologies as virtual templates for the environmentally problematic human condition. The individual, social, and environmental consequences of our current worldviews, ways of life, and knowing are increasingly clear on a wide range of fronts—locally, regionally, nationally, culturally, and globally. Indeed, The Stern Report (Stern, 2006, p. 1) declared that climate change is “the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen.”

Less well appreciated is how postmodernity’s various technologies and associated signs, markers, and templates also have a profound ability to make the everyday lifeworld and its dominant forms of socioecological relations and structures far more abstract. Such a nonpresenced lifeworld thus reconstitutes “by stealth” our personhood, the more-than-human world, and the relations between them. Indeed, the basic historical, material, and symbolic conditions of ontology are invisibly shaped, as are our subjectivities, and our social and environmental relationships.

The privacy of family life and the functioning and politic of the household have, ontologically and epistemologically, not escaped these often “invisible” social constructions and, therefore, social formations and arrangements. Most postmodern family members have mobile phones, credit cards, Web sites, and a range of hard and soft artifacts that, effectively, de/reconstruct “existing” moral and social relations and their invisible forms of interactions and exchange. The emotional costs of postmodernity’s trajectories toward the abstraction of ordinary, everyday life, including the relations of family members, are high (Elliott & Lemert, 2006). Environmental education, even in its critical forms, is not immune from the juggernaut of technics, abstractions, extensions, and corrections of what it is to educatively experience the self and relationships with others and these relations to, with, or *for* the world (Payne, 2003).

The stakes of this ontological abstraction are high. Rampaging postmodernity presents extraordinarily difficult cultural, intellectual, and personal conditions that underpin the complexity, and perhaps the folly, of imagining a postmodern environmental ethics and storying it via educational policies and practices. Dealing globally and culturally with, for example, climate change (Flannery, 2005) urgently demands a pragmatic, ontologically aware imagining of how traditional, existing forms of social and environmental relationships are changing, as are the demands placed on, for example, governments and individuals to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Consider one family example. The fortified, preservative-rich, perhaps genetically modified or chemicalized, and imported ingredients of one normal dinner eaten by one person in Australia will have collectively “travelled” up to 39,000 km by air, sea, and road to arrive on the dinner plate. Add to this family meal the distance, and environmental/economic costs/risks,





then travelled by the disposal of the numerous wastes. Dealing locally, personally, and more emphatically with the practical ethics of what we eat (Singer & Mason, 2006) also demands an urgent, pragmatic, and embodied reflection about our food and shopping preferences, as well as their social and environmental consequences (see also Payne, 1997).

The global and local challenges are (de)pressingly formidable. But there are real possibilities found in examining how the everyday household practices of green families can inform the ecopedagogies and ecocurricula that potentially translate to classrooms, school grounds, workplaces. Here, I bring into conversation the resistance work and best practices of green families with a more socially aware, material-driven, less idealized interpretation of the allegedly “noble” ancient Greek *Oikos* and; the philosophical reinstatement of the moral, social and ecological by Bauman, Arendt, and Sanders. One caution: Words, voices, language, texts, and discourses can only ever be mere approximations and, therefore, limited, reductive representations of human experience and agency, be they in empirical findings, theoretical development, or philosophical speculation (Abram, 1996; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The “conversation” of this hybrid text is then just that: the typeset and page the reader is currently experiencing, and the remainder of the text consists of the written epistemologies of more elaborate inquiries and understandings about the social ontologies we create and the agencies that flow from them. The conceptual purpose of these epistemologies is to sensitize the reader to the possibilities of further reconstructive work in environmental education.

CONSTITUTIVE ABSTRACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS

Bearing in mind this textual purpose, but as a springboard for an alternative definition of postmodernity as cultural condition and postmodernism as perspectives on knowledge and its truth claims, my preferred entry point into storying a version of postmodern environmental ethics is the socio-ontological vantage point.

I propose here that the conceptions and practices of postmodernity and postmodernism are, inevitably, complicit in the chronic abstraction of the living and nonliving lifeworlds—that these “posts” disembody, disembed, dematerialise, and decontextualize the “world” by reembodying, reembedding, rematerializing, and recontextualizing the subject/object in increasingly more abstract, technologically mediated and “ordered/corrected” and global forms (Payne, 2003). *Globalism* (James, 2006) is a term that seems to capture the flux, exchange, and ambiguity of the terms *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*.

Abstraction of the self and world is the underlying ontological source and consequence of globalism, which serves further to rearrange and disconnect the “I” from the “we” and from a range of environments, including nature. The disconnections of inner, social, and outer natures are, it seems to me, the grist of the educational challenge and quest for revealing postmodern environmental moralities and agencies, along with their social ethics and ecopolitics. Clearly, the modern and postmodern abstractions and mediations of the self, the social and the lifeworld have some advantages. Abstract theory can also sensitize us to the magnitude and global spread of the problems we now confront everyday. But I conclude that the ontologies of abstraction perpetuate a Cartesian-like severing and separation from the very environments with which we seek to have a more ethical relationship.

There is no advocacy here for “returning to nature” or “nature determinism.” Indeed, my interest in a “critical, ecological ontology” focuses on the weak ecocentric notion of education *for being for the environment* as a form of *doing* and *becoming* (Payne, 1997, 2006) as that notion is approached philosophically and historically through the empirical studies of *ecological dwelling*.





The pragmatic quest in this study is to identify, explain, and imagine the sorts of morality, sociability, politic, and ecology that can be found *in situ*, lying dormant in the *Oikos*.

The constitutive abstraction thesis—drawing upon four decades of theorizing by the Arena Group in Australia (James, 2006; Sharp, 1985)—focuses as much on the ontological formations through which social life is mediated as it does on the epistemological directions pursued in postmodernity that recursively reshape that ontology. This more theoretical thesis provides an alternative conceptual frame for clarifying the increasing messiness of the terms “postmodernity” and “postmodernism” and how they play off each other in obfuscating the environmentally problematic human ontological condition. My primary interests here in trying to (re)present a philosophical, historical, and phenomenological study of the home, as *Oikos*, are the socio-ontological categories of temporality, spatiality and embodiment. But these categories are not only constituted by globalism’s contemporary social conditions and views about knowledge but, indeed, are layered into the present and future by past social forms that live on in various ways—hence the “historicism” in the storying methodology employed here. James (2006) identified these ontological formations as *tribalism*, *traditionalism*, *modernism*, and *postmodernism*. They layer over each other in ways that might be coherent, dissonant, or contradictory. For example, we continue to “live” time and, therefore, space and place “relations” via “body” time (e.g., circadian rhythms), cosmological time, seasonal time, day/night time, the arrow and linear mechanical/analogical time of modernity, and now the dot/spot/blip time of digitalized postmodernity. Indeed, their lived contradictions and subsequent social and environmental relations may be “unhealthy” and undermine individual, collective, and ecological “well-being.” Thus, methodologically speaking, Arendt’s account of the ancient Greek *Oikos* is indicative only of how one ontological social formation around a certain form of temporality from the past partially lives on and informs this theorization of the *Oikos*. Numerous other studies of families beckon, for example, the “luddite” or “Amish” household.

Finally, to bluntly characterize the concept of abstraction and how it is socially framed and ecologically reconstituted, James (2006) views modernity’s ontologies of time and space as “empty,” whereas the postmodern is viewed as in transition to virtual and relativized “instantaneity” and “beyond space–time”; the ontologies of abstracting time, space, and embodiment can be understood primarily through the social forms in which we live. In “storying” or envisioning an *Oikos*, we are now mindful that more abstract, empty, virtual, instantaneous modes of living and (re)imagining environmental relations are progressively layered over the more concrete modes of living and domestic dwelling: in this selective instance, families’ “best resistance” practices. In this way, the *Oikos* offered here should be seen as an attempt to socially and materially reconstitute rather than replace those prior, increasingly abstracting forms.

OIKOS

Three vantage points are utilized in making additional sense of how the household potentially acts as a positive reconstitutive site for environmental education and sustainable living, and resistance to globalism’s deepening objectification, commodification, textualization, and abstraction of self, lifeworld, and environmental relations. Each vantage demands that texts such as this incorporate a stronger sense of the materiality and social relations of the household conditions and resources in which sustainable living is already practiced.

First, “ecology,” a key player in the often scientific, sometimes social, quest for a sustainable future, draws from the Greek term *Oikos*, whose meaning in relation to the polis of classical Greece is far more morally, socially, and environmentally complex than what we in environmental





education have textually been led to believe. Revisiting a passed human ecology, as I do here in reviewing the troubled private–public relations between the ancient Greek *Oikos* (or household economy/environmental house) and polis (or politicized citizenship) furnishes a useful frame for restoring the postmodern possibility of an ecopedagogy.

Second, a critical foray into the Greek household is instructive. Pecora (1997) concluded that the *Oikos* has been characterized as noble and, ironically, given the purposes of this volume of essays, is an “imaginary vision” whose discursive sources can be traced to the modern bourgeois longings for authenticity and social happiness. But here, the tension Pecora sees between the textually re-enchanted premodern *Oikos* and the overwhelmingly disenchanting but nostalgic present is problematized further. Nevett (1999) asserted that our knowledge of how Greek families functioned is, indeed, poor. Nevett’s “new” archaeology shifted methodologically from a reliance on textual sources only to a heterogeneous study of the textual, iconographic, and material artifacts of Greek houses, and not only those in the cultural centre of Athens but also in its geographically decentered regional margins. Nevett wanted to develop a clearer understanding of how relationships in the household were ordinarily enacted via a range of activities, interactions, artifacts and material conditions, and how the household practices were routinely located in everyday relation to Greek society.²

Third, and in a similar materialist frame and praxical vein as Nevett’s, my interpretive studies of a small number of inner-city and rural/regional “green” and “ordinary” families in Australia focused primarily on the environmental actions and inactions, or embodied relational experiences, “lived” use of resources and, hence, individual and collective ecopraxis of family members. These everyday “finding grounds” of individual and family practices informed the following philosophical storytelling.

GREEN HOUSEHOLDS: A MORAL, SOCIAL, AND ECOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Of specific interest, therefore, to this empirically driven, historical–materialist, critical–realist, and philosophical work of restoring the idealized premodern *Oikos* is how the green households studied acted as highly intimate, proximal, and participatory sites for family members to embody, construct, frame, and craft versions of environmental ethics and ecopolitics.

These now 45- to 55-year-old “green” parents were exposed and immersed, often unavoidably, in the 1960s and 1970s to a life-changing mix of experiences that remain hugely influential in the way their lives are practiced and re-imagined *for*, and *with*, their children, and each *other*. These significant experiences included the post-World War II baby boomers’ eventual “escape” to university and free “higher learning” through which other social and political freedoms were expressed in opposition to the Vietnam war; the lifestyles and values attractions of feminist and local environmental politics and issues, against the liberalizing lifeworld backdrops of hippies, communal living arrangements, and revolutions in popular music; and being exposed to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, and the nascent global environmental movement. Now “weary,” these 50-ish parents struggle consistently and intensely—morally and socially—with the practical difficulties they confront culturally and globally in the abstracted “privacy” of their own households. The different values they commit to, and parenting practices they employ, often sit uncomfortably, even in competition, with that of their peers, their professional demands and roles, and, more generally, work against the dominant social and political templates by which they are abstractly expected to live.

Nonetheless, despite this cultural antagonism and obviously lived dissonance of many of the green parents, most of their “pale green” children were enthused by their parents and inspired





to act as *other*, often confidently, in front of a peer and schooling culture that was overtly at odds with, or, at best, ambivalent about, the children's and their parents' green interests and commitments. Most of the 10- to 16-year-old children and young adults who participated in these studies proudly accepted their own identity and lifestyle "differences" but also respected, even celebrated, their parents' green differences and family eco-functioning.

Despite these promising cross-generational practices, one speculative conclusion restrains the textual impulse here to imagine too freely a future *Oikos* unsullied by any account of the prevailing cultural condition and its internally changing ontologies. Here, I remind the reader of the deepening encroachment into daily, "private" life of the symbolic and material sources of the constitutive abstraction thesis outlined earlier.

By and large, these once-activist, green parents were significantly "constrained" as children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s by a complex set of family arrangements, social expectations, and cultural "glue" that sustained depression-era and World War II "scarcity principles" in many households, and in related social arrangements. For example, an ascetic-like, modern "resourcefulness" rather than postmodern "buy-a-fix" consumerism underpinned their families' aspirations for better living conditions and enhanced intergenerational freedoms. Put simply, for the current green parents, their "living within one's means" in the formative years of the 1950s and 1960s were indebted to earlier "scarcity" ways of "grounded/concrete" life (provided by their parents and prevailing cultural context) that they, in turn, "re-traditionalized" or re-imagined practically in the 1970s and 1980s due to the changing cultural climate of relative freedom, greater opportunity, and heightened sense of social and environmental angst and purpose. Despite the current postmodern affluence and "postscarcity" entitlement and consumerist framings of the "everyday" in which the current children live, the older scarcity resourcefulness cultural logic so "materially" and "socially" influential to the current green parents remains clearly embodied and framed in the parenting practices they now employ with their 10- to 16-year-olds. That is, in their retraditionalized parenting practices and green households there appeared to be a strong dose of resistance and rejection of the abstracting trajectories of modernity and postmodernity and its ways of life.

If so, what horizons then exist for these "pale green" children's children, given the intense cultural, conservative, and domestic challenges the current 50-ish green parents experience and anguish about morally, socially, and practically? Such themes are addressed in the discussion of the primal nature of the responsibilities most of these green parents intuit, or have freely chosen, and whose intergenerational consequences for the future can really only be guessed at. How might we dare imagine a future horizon for the children of the current crop of "pale green" children different to the voracious present that the green parents studied here are so troubled by—one that is utterly precarious, risky, fluid, and abstracting in a wide range of familial, social, political, and environmental ways? Here, like the green parents studied, I am very cautious about the prospects for the next generation of pale green parents to live out their green inheritance or legacy. But, until the environmentally problematic human condition is acknowledged morally, socially, and politically, I see a glimmer of hope for environmental educators, researchers, and curriculum theorists/developers in the intergenerational ethic and ecopolitic currently practiced in these green households.

This is an empirical task that is partially revealed here in this philosophical restorying via Arendt, Bauman, and Sanders. Ginsborg (2005) reminds us that families remain *the agents* and *preeminent site* of everyday politics, the emotions, affections, and the construction of opinion. Herring (2003) invoked an array of evidence about how families, as agents of legal change, act as a subversive, primary form of association against the state's persistent corporate attempts to reconstruct "privatized" families along neo-liberal economic lines. For Bauman (1997), the "rocky road to justice" (in a world devastated and demoralized by local and global injustices) starts





with the beginning of morality in the home, where the immediate proximity of the face-to-face encounter *before anything* is the primal site of morality from one for the other and, according to Bauman, provides the sensitization we need to reflexively think through in formulating a micro, then macro, ethics for more others.

OIKOS: ARENDT AND THE PRIMACY OF THE SOCIAL

The household persists as one micro-ethical site of face-to-face encounters for family members, be it modern/nuclear, postmodern/blended/same, traditional/extended (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Berger, 2002) or arrested (Cote, 2000). There is also an abundant literature about the classical Greek *Oikos*, which can serve as a reference point for interpreting how postmodern households function, irrespective of their contemporary differences and sheer diversity. In practical terms, the Greek household or “estate” of the fourth and fifth centuries most often discussed in the literature, was a large social arrangement made up of family members, slaves, animals, the house and property, and the various goods produced, consumed, and disbursed (Pomeroy, 1995). The central problematics for Nevett (1999) in understanding the underlying materiality of everyday family functioning of the Greek household are the somewhat misleading assumptions made about the nature of the intra- and interrelationships of the *Oikos* and the civic body, or polis; or, as Arendt (1958) drew our attention to, the tensions between “the public and private realm” that are pursued here in restorying for an *Oikos*.

Arendt’s analysis of the values differentiation of Greek social and political life, and their blurring through to the present and, presumably, the future, is both intriguing and illuminating for those social and, inevitably, moral purposes emphasized here ecologically. A key idea of Arendt’s interpretations of Greek life and culture was the *fundamental* status of the “social” in the human condition where active engagement and action, as distinct from individualized labour, was utterly dependent upon the co-presence of others. Arendt’s (1958) analysis of social relations in the Greek household (noting the absence in Greek thought for the term *social*) sees these “private” relationships as naturally born of need in that there existed a “special relationship between action and being together” (p. 23). And, although a prescient Arendt did not dwell on the role of the human body in action, she linked the demise of the embodied naturalness of the social within the privacy of the *Oikos* to the (pejorative) rise of necessity, futility, and shame in the home. Effectively, Arendt claimed the body and its sociability, or perhaps, intercorporeality, was placed in the “hiding” of intimacy, subsistence, and the physical survival of the species.

Arendt traced how the rise in Greek political thought could only be achieved at the expense of that which was socially and morally embodied in those domestic realms and natural kinship relations. The “distinct, separate entities” (Arendt, 1958, p. 28) of private and public marginalized the household of material “necessity,” while elevating participation in the civic sphere to the abstract realm of “freedom.” Once the mundane, everyday *Oikos* had been mastered by the male property owner, sometimes violently, the political realm was then accessed where that freedom gained and duly exercised inevitably became the “social” basis of “equality.”

Axiomatic in Greek thought, according to Arendt, was that household necessity was the driving force of life, and the place for individual maintenance and species development. This “natural community” was essentially a pre-political phenomenon and material condition upon which freedom could be accessed and equally exercised by the (male) property owner, hence the “strict inequality” argued by Arendt about the division of the private and the public spheres, a dualism that practically lingers on despite the “one-sided” ability of politics, markets and technologies to govern and penetrate the household.





Moreover, mindful of the abstraction of the postmodern lifeworld mentioned earlier, Arendt's (1958) account of the disconnection of the polis and its preoccupation with worldly human affairs from the *Oikos* of gritty species survival extends to a discussion of how free speech in the public sphere is "separated off" from everyday action to become the esteemed domain of "words and persuasion." Aristotle's influential emphasis on the supremacy of the contemplative (and beyond speech) *nous*, according to Arendt, further confirmed the political and discursive shift to the then public/civil abstraction of human action and free social interaction, and consequently, marginalization of the natural, social life of the *Oikos*. Not coincidentally, politicians' "spin" and "weasel words" are now a target of (limited) criticism but most evident in the manner in which a number of world leaders have dismissed much of The Stern Report.

Arendt's analysis helps us see a little more clearly the early rise of the supremacy of the polis as "a way of life" where "only speech made sense" and the central concern of all (political, male) citizens "was to talk to each other" (p. 27). This division of private (organic, social, material) *Oikos* and public (rhetoric, imagery, abstracting) polis remains a primary factor in the profound misunderstandings that continue to this day about the different natures of the moral-social interfaces of the private sphere and the ethico-political interfaces of the public spheres.

There is a need, as I attempt here, to critically clarify the continued blurring of the *Oikos* (as a potential social realm of private resistance and moral/material necessity) with and against the de/reconstructive role played morally, socially, and ecologically by globalism's polis in "governing" the family according to postmodernity's economic, political, and cultural imperatives. All too often this anti-ecological governing of the household is "re-presented" in terms of a consumer-entertainment-lifestyle "choice" and "freedom" on one hand, and "fear" and "security" on the other.

This contradiction, I argue, provides fertile symbolic and abstracting "grounds" for the probable undermining of human agency and betrayal of action, and a moral "beginning" we hope *for* the other. Or, in the simplest of terms, why so many young people feel they cannot make a difference despite their increased environmental knowledge and concern (Fien, 2002). Resistance as (re)storying?

Our approach to environmental parenting is to integrate it (the environment) into everything we do—in health, food, exercising, energy, composting, and so on—because we see the power of the social process we can create in the home and in the way our children grow. (Sarah, 53, partner to Jeff and mother of Rae)

BEING FOR: BAUMAN AND CHOOSING TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE OTHER

Arendt's interest in the difficult relationship of private necessity, survival, and sustainability in the *Oikos* and the polis and its claims on freedom and equality invites further, deeper deliberation about a remoralized approach to (environmental) education. If Arendt is even partially correct about the *fundamental* status and household role of the social in the human condition, what primal or basic versions of morality in the intimacy of the household "place" might accompany a renewed sociability in the postmodern? This would be a postmodern morality that does not foreclose on the *other* and our intuitions, responsibilities and "choices" *for* it, including the otherness of the environment.

For Bauman (1993), the notion of "moral proximity" is a key to understanding how postmodern ethics might be reimagined, because it is in the intimacy of the self and the other,





“in the home,” be it metaphorical or literal for Bauman, where morality is born and found. “Distance” (and, inevitably, alienation and abstraction of social and environmental relations) is, according to Bauman, the “realm of estrangement and the Law.”

Questions about the impoverished status of the moral in contemporary globalized cultures and societies have been posed and pursued relentlessly by Bauman (1993, 1995, 1997). More recently, Bauman (2006), in *Liquid Fear*, made his strongest statement yet on the links between postmodernity, morality, and the immediate prospect of the planet becoming unliveable. He sourced what he referred to as the “horror of the unmanageable” in the combination of “anthropomorphic fallacy” and “moral lag” in modernity and its subsequent abyss in postmodernity. Bauman is highly critical of the ethics of modernity, its many failed ideals and illusions not grounded in morality, and the consequent emptiness of what now passes as ethics in postmodernity. Moral and ethical problems abound and, he argues, cannot escape the dilution of principle, fragmentation of known social contexts, including the family, and increasingly episodic, mediated, and abstracted nature of multiple, often contradictory human experiences.

Bauman grasps this moral opportunity and ethical void to advance the idea of “being for.” It draws its inspiration and radical force from Emmanuel Levinas’ postulate of “before anything” *I* am framed for the service, self-sacrifice, and good of the *other*, where no senses of the we, as accumulations of the I, or reciprocity, are implied. For Levinas, *being for* is pre-ontological. *Being for* is clearly at odds with the “me-ism” authors other than Bauman align with modern possessive individualism and the rise of postmodern aesthetic individualism (e.g., McCarthy, 1991). But it is also at odds with the directly related criticisms via the thesis of constitutive abstraction of the ideology of autonomy, the consumerist pursuit of “freedom,” and their concomitant privileging of subjectivity(ies), all of which, unhesitatingly, are reconstitutive of the ecological problematic and its ontologizing of the risky, fearful, and precarious human condition.³

The notion of *being for* is still practically and anthropocentrically visible in, for example, that unconditional love many parents express for their children, day-in, day-out, in the home. Hence Arendt’s philosophical scaffold here alongside my interpretive studies of green parents and their children. That is, the primal and proximal “unconditionality” and intuiting of the moral (and, therefore, social) relationship we preconsciously and prediscursively embody, and existentially enact, of parental love *to* and responsibility *for* a child irrespective of any anticipation of moral and/or social reciprocity from that other signals the moral possibility *before anything* of *being for* the other. And, again, we sometimes do see that moral intuition or instinct of *being for* in the unambiguous biocentric (or organismic) caring often demonstrated by family members for the family pet.⁴ This intuitive or organic type of “egalitarian” morality *for* the intrinsic worth of the other begins to elaborate the underpinnings of Arendt’s *a priori* of the social in the necessity of the *Oikos*, and a renewed hope in our own postmodern *being* of a moral sensitisation or impulse *for* the ecological. But, to be sure, this proximal moral space is ambivalent and, according to Bauman (1993) is “torn apart by the impulse to stay and the impulse to escape” (p. 89).

Noteworthy at this moral point of ambivalence are findings from the study of green households is how many of the parents made choices about their (dis)engagement in public (social and environmental) politics. Most mothers, and some fathers, retreated to the privacy and intimacy of the domestic realm (Payne, 2005a, 2005b). This retreat to another version of Christopher Lasch’s “haven in a heartless world,” despite the encroaching abstraction constituting its membership, was primarily due to family circumstances in which hard moral, social, professional, and financial choices and priorities were made about the sustainability of a family way of life, particularly after the arrival of the first child.⁵ Invariably, however, this initial retreat was followed by the parental re-imagining and democratic development of the lived household ecopolitic/postmodern *Oikos* outlined earlier. Significantly, the majority of mothers participating in the studies relished the





prospect of returning their temporarily withdrawn labours and commitments (eco/social) in the private, domestic realm of *Oikos* politics to the public, activist polis realm in the not-too-distant future. But the family, in the first, proximal, face-to-face instance, had clearly taken moral and social priority.

Bauman (1993) is passionate about a “return” to the pre-ontological primal and proximal moral space. He raises the question of when “knowledge” from the other, or “third party,” following Levinas, intervenes that there are demands “I make it (the moral intuition) speak” (p. 90). Not only do we here encounter the problem of the “naming” of a pre-ontological intuiting of what might stand as a remoralized version of “inner nature,” Bauman proceeds to the serious question raised by Arendt about “social nature” when he dwells inordinately on the “agony” of *choosing to be responsible for taking responsibility for the other*. And perhaps, we see some real evidence of a partial reconciliation between inner (moral) and social (ethical) natures in the “unconditional” manner “practised” in the retraditionalized postmodern everyday *Oikos* outlined above. According to Bauman, choosing knowingly to be responsible for the other precedes any socially constructed modern ethical theories, many of which he claims are “blind alleys” (Bauman, 1993, p. 2). Hence the chronic agony and its loneliness for the (potentially) postmodern moral agent (parenting, teaching), whose “pain” for most of us has been made far easier with less moral choice and agony by modernity’s legislating and substituting of ethical law for the pre-ontological but proximal moral spacing of *being for the other*.

She’s our only daughter and we had her late. We want her to have a strong sense of her self—a mix of values, ethics, equity, and spirituality—as a precondition to encountering the mixed difficulty we live in. (Jeff, 53)

Ecological Affordances; Sanders and “First Philosophy”

Sanders’ account of the “ontological primitive” of an ecological approach to the observer’s perception of affordances links indirectly with the pre-ontological form of moral intuition and choosing of responsibility for the *other* outlined earlier. Together, the social line of moral thinking I have drawn between Arendt, Levinas, and Bauman now invites clarification of the term *other*, and responsibility for it, given the chronic rehearsal in the academy of that very open term whose openness potentially invokes anthropocentric assumptions, or becomes meaningless in its propensity to abstraction. At risk is the potential in the *other* and *otherness* for emptying, hollowing and flattening of any ecocentric aspirations in retraditionalizing and restoring education and, reconciliation, even partial, of inner, social and outer “natures.”

Sanders draws heavily upon the influential works in phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and ecological psychology of J. J. Gibson. Each played formidable roles in dismantling the subject–object and, in different ways, mind–body binaries and, therefore, I–world separation—that notorious Cartesian dualism (and associated values such as hierarchical thinking) that many suggest lay at the positivist heart of the human-over-nature sourcing of the ecological crisis and environmentally problematic human condition.

And, following the deconstruction of the foundational truth of a hard subject-object distinction, we might well query, as does Sanders (1999), what version(s) of truth about “knowing” and “coming to know,” or “epistemological primacy,” is contained in, and conceived by, the mind–body and subject–object (re)connections. The “primitive” with which Sanders was concerned is the constellation and multiplicity of affordances, or attunements and opportunities for action available to the observer from within the environment. Affordances are “rich” in the *othered* perceptual possibilities offered to the actor in “*can do*” relation to that perceptual horizon. For an everyday



example, the same river will be perceived as a social construction quite differently by the artist, the farmer, the engineer, the kayaker and the prime minister. This constellation and multiplicity of rich environmental possibilities and affordances of otherness, it seems to me, is conceptually (and practically) consistent with the choices, ambivalence, and agony of the moral agent that Bauman so passionately pursued in his persuasive account of reclaiming the primal moral place of *being for* and, consequently, the existential predicament of *choosing to take responsibility for being responsible*. The rich multiplicity of the *ecological otherness* of the *other* of the observed environment, it seems to me, *affords* the elusive ecological subjectivity and morality *from* which environmental educators might educate *for*.

And, it is at this juncture that I must gesture only, via the (more materialist, less idealized/linguistified Greek conception of the *Oikos*, Bauman's exhortation for the other, the evidence-base from my studies of green families and their *othered* postmodern *Oikos*, to, for example, that literature that seriously has addressed the *other* as including the *wild*, or vice-versa. For example, Snyder's (1999) chapter on "the etiquette of freedom" is another poetic example in the English-speaking world of the much admired nature writing genre in North America that draws upon the inspirational insights of Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Lopez, and so on. Snyder, still confined by language and its severing from the depths of human experience, including the potentially pre-ontological and intuited morality and sense of sociability argued for above, invites a far more ecocentric play on the meanings of the terms like wild, nature, wildness, wilderness, as they are inner, social and outer. Briggs' (2001) philosophical deconstruction of environmental ethics highlights how "wild" thoughts are part of the missing otherness required in a reconstructed environmental ethics.

Sanders, like Merleau-Ponty and Gibson, is critical of that notion of affordances which implies a singular and often exploitative response by the *subject*, conditioned by culture (and embodied, invariably through instrumental reason), to the *object* of perception in the environment. Irrigators in dry, parched Australia do see rivers as unidimensional and profitable, notwithstanding the continent's well-known history and the "new" facts about climate change and its consequences. The barrage of possibilities available to the observer before that cultural conditioning not only opens up for the perceiver the wild otherness of the othered wild, as indicator of "nature," but effectively dismantles the mind-body and subject-object binaries conceived and predicted by the subject in behavioural responding to the environment's objectification and culture's denaturing of nature and taming of the wild. For example, the kayaker does not necessarily need to respond via particular performative skills such as pirouetting to prominent "storied" expectations of parts of a "river" in such a way that demonstrates his or her competence or expertise, or kudos. Here, a range of other environmental or perceptual affordances are "backgrounded" instrumentally to the "use and exploit" mentality, even if pirouetting is a relatively harmless action. Likewise in the postmodern *Oikos* of the green household. Some families grew their own vegetables; one family chose to make its own bread because at least 200 plastic bags would be saved each year. Otherness and wildness were played out practically, ecocentrically and socially in the domestic politic of the privacy of the home. Parents and families "chose" to resist the penetration of abstraction (and consumerism).

The richness of river (including its othered "woundedness"⁶), its constitution and proximal and temporal surroundings can be experienced perceptually and in action in a multiplicity of ways by the *observer* using different mediums of embodied movement less framed by, for example, the "ecological" footprints of culture and its technics (Payne, 2003). Likewise, for the reimagined *Oikos* developed here, even as a socially constructed cultural artefact, its "green" materiality, iconic and communicative restructuring by parents created the perceptual, relational, conceptual, and actional conditions of "otherness" of the socioecological type we are here keen to re-present materially and socially, following Nevet's archaeological methodology.



Clearly, Sanders, and others want to ecologically reclaim embodied agency and its “primacy of practice” (Archer, 2000) for which “other” perceptions, sensibilities, affordances and subjectivities are important. Sanders’ first philosophy of an ecology of affordances stresses the fundamental character of what might best be termed an intercorporeal ecological agency about the way in which “worlds could be at all” (Sanders, 1999, p. 135) according to a much richer environmental *sensibility* in education about what, perceptually and conceptually, we *can do* (Payne, 2005d). Ecology understood in this agential and perceptual manner—the constellation and multiplicity of affordances richly available in the environment to the reattuned wild observer—differs markedly from most conceptions of ecology and the environment by which we have become discursively and textually trapped, including what is represented in and by environmental education and its research. If my analysis is correct, Sanders’ conception of an ecology of affordances is highly suggestive of the multiplicity or “wild otherness” of the other Bauman morally believes we might agonizingly choose in taking responsibility for that other. Strikingly prescient to the thought of Bauman and Sanders, Leopold (1966) observed that the promotion of perception was the only truly creative part of recreational engineering, that the outstanding characteristic of perception was that it entailed no consumption and no dilution of any resource, and that it depended for its ecological qualities on the moral eye of the beholder.

I love seeing wildlife like paddymelons and bandicoots but it is hard to describe nature because it was here before we came along. Humans are nature but it depends on different meanings—like the nature who you are, what you are like and nature as wildlife and animals, which I like (Rae, 11, daughter of Sarah and Jeff).

THE MORAL, SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL PRIMACIES OF WILDLY IMAGINING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, AND ITS RESEARCH

Sanders, Merleau-Ponty, and Gibson textually sensitized us to the “otherness” of the others that Bauman morally believes in our responsibility *for*, beginning “in the home,” and which Arendt sees socially in the a priori of the Greek household. That *other* has been opened up to its wildness or, for a more ecocentric (re)storying of education, we might well consider how the other is a dimension of wildness. The empirically qualified postmodern *Oikos* outlined here aims not to be an othered, wild imaginary bequeathed by ideology, nor a textual exercise in seductive mythmaking. Rather, this pragmatic, hybrid, “grounded philosophy” of the *Oikos* is offered as an intellectual resource⁷ that serves to reawaken the social, moral, political, and ecological impulses that, possibly, is primal to the human condition but, probably, has been subjugated. The morally “humanist” choice and agony Bauman laid at our hearts and minds in *taking responsibility* for the other summons us all, be it as a parent, or teacher, or political leader, or plain old citizen. It summons because of the chronic problematics of the ethics of modernity and postmodernity that betray the moral and social story told here *for* educators, parents, and colleagues who agonize about their responsibilities and intuitions for the other, and all of which, when abstraction takes over, are anthropocentrically complicit in reconstituting the crisis-like environmentally problematic human condition.

Finding our morality, storying it, and making Bauman’s choice an ecostory and pedagogical reality will not be an easy one, as the “green” parents and their “pale green” children demonstrate all too clearly in their intergenerational and agonizing efforts to resist dominant culture in being for each other and for the environment. Finding or retrieving, let alone consciously making, this choice about moral responsibilities, social, community, and environmental relations is, presumably, not for all who individually have, or confess to having, too much to lose. But, despite all of the cultural opposition these green parents and their children experience, ecopedagogically and



ecopraxically in the home, but also at school and at work, we might well learn from their agential senses of purpose, engagement, resourcefulness, sheer mettle, and wild action. To story the home as a wild form of moral, social, and environmental relation will make it much easier to restory a postmodern *Oikos* in education whose practical and theoretical gesture here is to an embodied, concrete, less individualized, and less abstract form of individual and collective *eco-being, doing, belonging, dwelling, placing and becoming* in a wider variety of places and spaces.

NOTES

1. Studies of the contemporary household practices of sustainable living and their preferred ecopedagogies have largely remained invisible in the social sciences, including environmental education inquiry, health promotion research and family studies (Payne, 2005a, 2005b). Ballantine, Fien, and Packer (2001) examined how environmental lessons learned at school have translated into household understandings and practices.

2. Nevett concluded her new archaeological methodology provided for a broader geographical perspective; that textual-only sources are often misleading and sometimes grossly oversimplify important complex matters that, in this instance, reify static models and accounts of the *Oikos*.

3. The critique of individualism, individuation processes, subjectivity, and ideology of autonomy is well established. Less clear is its intensification in a globalized “economy” and its consequences, including “emotional” that compound the chronic abstraction of that individual and his or her social conditions and environmental relations (James, 2006; Sharp, 1985).

4. Bauman (1993) saw deficiencies in notions like “being with” and “being aside” by drawing on Levinas’ view that morality is before ontology, for precedes with, and both are before epistemology. Interestingly, the preposition for (the environment) in environmental education has generated considerable debate for reasons different to the empirically qualified restorying of a postmodern *Oikos*. If imaginable, that debate might need revisiting and restorying along the moral, social, political and ecological “lines” proposed here.

5. The highly educated parents consistently reported earning far less than their professional potential or that of their peers. One partner, mostly the mother, stayed at home, out of need/necessity for the child, following Arendt, but also as a consequence of democratic decision making in the home (contra the patriarchal *Oikos*). Some mothers and fathers worked part time. One systematically “re”fathered himself to deconstruct his own father’s (negative) legacy about parenting practices. Many families shunned material goods, in particular, electronic forms of home entertainment whose consequence for the “difference” and taming of their children, and predictable peer reactions, created considerable parental anguish that, surprisingly for this researcher, was far less evident in the “otherness” of the children studied.

6. I am indebted to my colleague, Dr. Brian Wattchow, for this term but moreso for the sustained practical and intellectual work he has undertaken in phenomenologically studying and poetically representing the ecopedagogies of river places.

7. For a “mapping” of an intercorporeal/ecocentric approach to methodology and inquiry, see Payne (2005c).

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Morphing Geography

My father sees trees as flames. He sees cities as concentrations of energy with buildings rising and popping like bubbles as if the surface of the earth itself was boiling. Speeding up time so that every day equals 1 second, the rate at which trees and buildings rise and fall, flutter and grow, becomes such that forests and cities appear to be hot spots, burning and boiling. His philosophy, his thinking about the world, is intricately linked to the surface of the earth and a geological perspective on time. Sitting at home in the soft yellow light of his reading lamp, we would talk together for hours about these essentially unanswerable questions. . . . What is this world that we live in? What is time? If we change our perspective on the world, how does that alter our understandings of what it means to be human, or what our individuality, actions, or values are?

Exploring different regions and places over time, I would return to the images of the flame and the boil, intrigued by the vast array of possibilities in which to view this planet. Sitting atop an exposed monocline, looking down at the valley below, I could see the rolling mountains as waves. Traveling down a cold, fast-moving river, I heard the grinding of rocks and could sense the rivers as knives and canyons as wounds on the surface of the earth.

Though they began years ago when I lived at home, these discussions with my father continue still now—he with his reading lamp, and I with my own. Lately, our questions explore the tensions and synergies that exist between a geologic perspective on time and so-called “real” issues such as poverty, desertification, extinction, and so on. I find myself asking, “while we sit here and muse on the relationships between time and the surface of the earth, who is suffering, dying, extinct?”

Surely there are many. Yet, in the face of this suffering, I believe that this questioning does *do* something. Exactly how, why, or for whom I will never entirely understand. But, as time goes on, the discussions recur and the questions remain. We continue to ask, *What is this world that we live in?* I don't know, but how can we imagine it?

Nora Timmerman
Bill Timmerman



Photographs by Bill Timmerman
(from top: Sugar Maple,
Pennsylvania, 1978;
Monroe & La Salle,
Chicago, 2003;
Dune, Death Valley, 1998)



