CULTURAL SPACES FOR SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

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Dedicated to the memory of

Paul Kurian
(ardent environmentalist)

Excerpts from Ramachandra Guba in the Economic and Political Weekly,
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"I first heard of Paul Kurian from a teacher of mine in Calcutta. In the early 1970s they had been students together at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. Those were the halcyon days of the JNU, newly set up, with its teachers and students fiercely committed to scholarship and ideological debate, or rather, with the inter-penetration of one with the other. Among the precociously gifted talents at the university were my teacher and Paul. One was a Maoist, the other a Trotskyist; both had an acute intelligence and a formidable knowledge of the scriptures ..."

"When I got to know Paul Kurian - some fifteen years after he had argued so heatedly with my teacher about texts and contexts - he had lost much of his dogma and certitude, though little of his love of ideas. When we first met he had just read Juan Martinez Alier's magisterial history of ecological economics and could talk of nothing else. The book was not available in India. Paul himself had read it in Europe, and was determined that it should be known and discussed here. He was especially persuaded of the work's larger methodological claim, that energy flows rather than money more accurately captured the performance and sustainability of an
economy. Immediately he set to work at organising (in Bangalore, where he was then based) a conference on energy, environment and development. With meticulous care he planned the meeting, pairing topics with persons. He even persuaded Martinez Alier (whom he had not then met) to come…"

“When I knew him Paul’s abiding interest was energy economics, but in his JNU days his main focus of research had been on the condition of the working class. He co-authored a long essay, published in this journal, on the Solidarity movement in Poland, and I have been told that his study of the process of mechanisation in the mines of Chattisgarh was greatly valued by the worker’s union there. He retained to the last his love of ideas, being…as energetic and mentally alert as ever…As the JNU students…make their important contributions to the intellectual life of this country – in sociology, history, economics and political science – let us remember Paul Kurian, one of the most brilliant, if tragically ill-fated, of them all.”

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Introduction

Ever so often I remember a reflection made by one of my college professor’s, a French Jesuit priest, about who we really are, our intrinsic nature. The priest was Fr. Paul Gueriviere, and he would say, “We are first ‘human beings’, and only then are we Hindus or Muslims or Christians… We must learn to appreciate and believe in ‘our common humanity’ above everything else.” Our common humanity – that has remained deeply etched in my mind. And when I read the pieces in this volume this notion is a constant refrain shining through. It is a ‘given’ in each author’s conscious and unconscious articulation, making up her psychological disposition as it were.

The Buddha has said that the ‘self’ does not exist. What he was really saying was that a ‘constructed self’ does not exist, that it is unreal since it is a mere fabrication of a disoriented consciousness. Hence, the ‘self’ that dislikes the Dalits, the ‘self’ that dislikes Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists – all these are unreal, often the unsuspecting invention of the biases and misleading values acquired from family, religion, schools, friends, leaders and political ideologies. This is not to discount the positive values and attitudes that families, faith traditions and institutions provide. I’m merely underlying the fact that a few of our notions and beliefs may be wrong, even very wrong, and may go against our best civilizational values, replete with kindness and generosity, that we so wish to see expressed all around us. Yes, the false ‘self’ could, in multiple unconscious ways, be thwarting our access to an
Standard Of Attainment
Nai Talim may be said to have seven standards of achievement, namely, the capacity to appreciate true art, responsible citizenship, self-reliance, clean and healthy living, self-sufficiency, sufficient mastery over the subject, and acquaintance with fundamental scientific, mathematical and mechanical principles.

Concluding Observation
By now, it should be clear that Nai Talim links education, work and technology, insists on making work wholesome, and integrates work with living and livelihood processes, based on certain values and principles. When viewed from this perspective, Nai Talim has universal and eternal significance. If Sustainable Human Development is the need of the hour, and education is the best means of realizing it, a re-reading and re-discovery of Nai Talim becomes inevitable. One of the supreme tragedies of our time is our continued neglect of Gandhian thought and ideas, even as we deify him as the ‘Father of the Nation’

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References

Cultural Citizenship
Reflections on creative traditionalism, limits and an emergent earth culture

Marcus Bussey

We’re at our best when we mean it.
We all start part of a much bigger notion.
And lock ourselves down like we don’t have a say.

—Tempest, 2014, p. 82

This chapter offers a series of reflections on the concept of creative citizenship. This concept came to me when I was working in Singapore with ceramicists and artisans who had the good fortune to have access to one of Singapore’s two remaining dragon kilns. These are remarkable pre-industrial kilns used to fire the bricks and latex-gathering cups of the British colonial period, when rubber gathering was a key economic ingredient to the island’s economy. Idle for some fifty years these kilns were mostly destroyed as modern Singapore expanded. Watching the rebirth of the Thow Kwang dragon kiln made me appreciate the cultural vitality at work in the efforts to both protect and utilise the kiln in a range of cultural, artistic and educational settings. These people were dynamic cultural citizens aware that elements of the past were vital ingredients in Singapore’s futures. They were working with a material cultural artefact, yet this meant researching and reinvigorating the intangible cultural practices that grew up around the kiln. They had no desire to go back to a mythi-
cal ‘good old days’ but they wished to salvage, reutilise and celebrate the kiln and explore its artistic, cultural and economic possibilities.

The Thow Kwang community valued tradition, and felt it had a vital contribution to make to Singapore’s present and future. They were, therefore, great examples of creative traditionalism at work. Yet they knew they faced limits in what they could achieve. They worked to build a thriving and sustainable business around the kiln, they understood that championing it as a gift from the past was key to communicating its intangible value to future Singaporeans and that therefore the creative potential was bounded by present limits to what one could achieve. They had a strong sense of cultural agency and were able to reflect on the drive of modernity — as expressed in Singapore’s erasure of much of its past — to close down reflection and silence dissenting futures. This reflexivity is a key element in cultural citizenship as it moves the citizen away from what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls the ‘bare life’ of homo sacer.

Singapore of course is not the only nation state to wish to put the past behind them. It is a modernist tendency to focus on the future, to leverage value sets and images that define the future as given and not subject to debate. Yet we live in a time of contestation in which polarised visions of the future are deeply challenging community and individual identity. We are suspicious of dreams, and risk averse — not wishing, for instance, to be optimistic about the future in the face of its colonisation by a degraded politics, ecosystem failure, technological anonymity, diminished agency and tribalising identity. Yet, just as in Singapore, everywhere there are cultural citizens blazing trails into alternative futures, sowing new dreams, se-

lectively accessing past traditions and developing new memes to problematise the ‘locked down self’ that poet Kate Tempest refers to in the opening lines above. In short, cultural citizens are the ‘cultural creatives’ that Paul Ray and his colleagues described some years ago (2000).

In what follows I reflect on threads in the cultural database that have relevance for thinking about culture, religion and sustainability. As a cultural citizen, sustainability has been a long-term interest of mine (Bussey, 2001, 2008, 2012). My approach is to not simply locate sustainability in the economic or environmental realms but to broaden my explorations and research into considerations of physical, intellectual, ethical, emotional and spiritual sustainability. This presumes a new expression of our humanness — our neohumanity — in solidarity with the broader earth community we share this planet with. In what follows, I apply a creative traditionalist approach to the Indian epic of the Mahabharata; explore the image of the Angel of History offered by Walter Benjamin and contrast this with the image of the Mahasambhuti deployed by P. R. Sarkar; and move on to considerations of earth community and solidarity with the non-human ‘citizens’ of our planet found respectively in the work of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton.

Long ago, on the field of Kuruksetra two great armies met. They faced one another across the space ready to attack. Between them the warrior Prince Arjuna stood on a chariot pulled by the Lord Krishna. Arjuna was frozen with indecision because he knew that next move would inevitably lead to
the death of many people. Krishna of course advised him to fight for dharma or righteousness. This image, taken from the great Indian epic the Mahabharata and crystallised in the Bhagavat Gita is a classical metaphor for life. On the one side you have the forces of darkness, the Kaurava princes and their followers whilst on the other side you have the good guys, the Pandava princes. In between lies the field of action — the Kuruksetra. Now it is easy to focus on the struggle between the good and the bad. This fits a range of deep cultural narratives about the struggle between good and evil, light and dark and so on. This dualistic trope misses the subtlety of the scene however, which is that it is the field itself where Arjuna and Krishna stand that is of real interest. This is the space of action, this is the world in which consciousness is honed from struggle, where values and ideals are tested, where aspiration and yearning wrestle with despair and meaninglessness. Epistemologically we could say that rather than two forces defining the world in which we live there are three, and drawing on Tantric philosophy we can turn to the concept of prana in which the three gunas — the tamasik dull force, the rajasik mutative force and the satvik subtle force are always in the process of reconfiguring the state of affairs. From this perspective we can now understand the Kauravas as the tamasik force, the Pandavas as the Satvik and Arjuna as the Rajasik. Krishna, as (higher) consciousness, is there to help Arjun overcome his confusion and dismay and act for the greater good.

Adopting a pranic approach to sustainability thinking and action bypasses the cultural compulsion to think in binaries such as sustainable/unsustainable. If we do this we can better appreciate that sustainability is a process, a never-ending process, of adjusting with the world in order to maintain a desired state. This is truly a battle of epic dimensions in which we as cultural citizens are all involved. It is a struggle to function in a world that is multiple, complex and even paradoxical. It suggests that the future is no longer singular but open and contested. It comes with the realisation that to understand the battle being fought on the Kuruksetra we must appreciate that the Kauravas had their desired futures and that they were fighting to sustain a status quo from which they benefitted. Similarly, the Pandavas also had their preferred futures, ones that from the perspective of the narrative were worthier (more dharmic) than their enemies. Their fight was to initiate a new state of affairs that spread the benefits of human society and spiritual possibility beyond vested interests. The Kauravas represented a concern for sustainability based on limited self-interest and short termism; the Padvas represented a desire for sustainable futures that were expansive and long term. The field of the Kuruksetra is where these two visions of sustainability were contested. This mytho-poetic narrative is timeless, thus we still stand in that very same field beside Arjuna and must also listen to Krishna’s advice.

Tradition and innovation are the hallmarks of this contest in which we today express our cultural citizenship through the ongoing labour of hearts, heads and hands in the service of the plural contested needs of planetary stakeholders. To serve the plural is key to understanding the fact that the world is a harmonic wave of voices, each with its own needs, functions and desires. Thus, from the perspective of our placement in the rajasik field of Kuruksetra there is no singularity, no unitary whole or primary claim. Rather, there is multiplicity in which human and non-human alike seeks expression. It is the totality that is life, ipseity and being. Put another way, we in-
ter-are and must work for sustainable futures (the plural again) that are forever open, vulnerable and inclusive. This is the ethics of the Kuruksetra that Arjuna needed to grasp in order to act, because only through action is the world expressed. This is the essence of a spiritual pragmatics in which the whole is served through the interaction of the parts in a creative, perpetually unfolding process that draws upon the past whilst generating new cultural elements through the encountering of novel and surprising contexts that emerge from our labours, struggles and longings (Bussey, 2014). The present, therefore, is always remarkable and our cultural citizenship is performed/realised in that rajatik space that modulates and mutates with every action of every part of the dynamic system I characterised above as the field of Kuruksetra.

To be an engaged cultural citizen is to draw on one’s heritage whilst being free to reimagine it in the service of context. This requires a good dose of creative traditionalism in which enabling features of traditions are drawn upon to meet the emergent needs of the future. In this way elements of the past and future meet in the present to provoke the ongoing evolution of our individual and collective consciousness. For example, calling upon the scene of the Kuruksetra as I do above, is to draw upon tradition to reframe the current environmental and social crises. It is to acknowledge that the work of building a better, more inclusive and resilient world is never done. There is no terminus, only struggle. Such a realisation is not to acknowledge defeat but instead, to embrace the ongoing work of becoming more fully human. For the most part, we are unconscious cultural actors. Culture works as a program for sense-making in the world. To sense-make is to project meaning onto the material and subjective processes we inhabit; it is to anchor our identity in that meaning so that we can find our bearings in a world that is forever in flux. Thus, from Chaos — the primal soup — culture brings order in the form of Cosmos. Together we have the reality of an inhabited and creative Chaosmos from which the new arises eternally in the guise of the old.

Essentially culture tells us who we are. Simultaneously it limits our horizons whilst offering us escape routes (Bussey, 2013, 2017a). To be a cultural citizen is to have the critical capacity to loosen the bonds of culture upon our choices and imaginations and to be, as Foucault (2002) put it, a little less governed by the politics of cultural conditioning. To be less governed is to be more free. Yet freedom is a burden as it brings with it choice. This is what paralysed Arjuna.

To consciously inhabit Chaosmos is to step into our roles as cultural citizens and embrace our cultural agency. It is to recognise that we can work with culture as opposed to following the ‘program’ without reflection. To take up our cultural citizenship is to take on the role of the cultural hacker. To hack is to manipulate the possibilities of a program, to test its limits and to explore its potential to serve other purposes than those it was originally designed to fulfil. In short, cultural citizens are cultural hackers (Bussey, 2017b). This is a good thing when we are aware of this, but of course a hacker is not necessarily committed to the interests of any given group. The hacker can quite simply enjoy the hack for its own sake, or worse, hack in the service of narrow vested interests. So much depends on the values orientation of the hacker (Wark, 2004). To substitute cultural citizen for cultural hacker and to situate that citizen in the field of Kuruksetra brings context to the abstract. To frame Kuruksetra through the lens of prama, is to offer a cultural hack that releases new possibilities into the cultural domain. No longer is it a struggle between good
and evil. Now its possibilities are enriched, as it is brought out
of the timelessness of the mythic and enters time in the
present to destabilise our cultural comfort-zones. Not only
does the cultural citizen as hacker bring new energy to an an-
cient metaphor, but the past itself enters the present and fu-
ture as an ongoing goad to creative cultural renewal. Thus, the
past that can be experienced as a prison can become a dynam-
ic player in birthing alternative futures.

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a wonderful cultural citi-
zan. He trawled his world looking for clues into the nature of
historical and cultural process. One of his reflections is par-
ticularly famous amongst historians. It is found in his ‘Theses
on the Philosophy of History’ and concerns the Angel of
History. Though brief, his words offer us a way of thinking
about the work of the cultural citizen as a creative traditional-
ist.

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking
as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly
contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings
are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face
is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he
sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon
wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to
stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.
But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his
wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them.
This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his
back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
This storm is what we call progress (1969, pp. 257–258).

Clearly this angel has a problem. Benjamin, witnessing the
debasement of culture, communication, relationships and
ideas at the hands of the Nazis regime, is lamenting that the
past, so neatly crafted by historians, is in fact a single cata-
strophe, a ‘storm blowing from paradise’, that piles debris
around the angel. The angel has no agency, is powerless to
hold the storm back, and is thus totally at the mercy of the
cultural project of progress. In this image, the cultural pro-
gram is set on default. Benjamin, in naming this surrender to
unreflective culture as an indiscriminate force propelling us
into the future, is performing an important cultural hack. We
should ‘awaken the dead’ and reclaim our cultural agency by
making ‘whole what has been smashed’. Yet ironically Ben-
jamin was a fan not of a singular cultural narrative. His focus
was always on the multiple. Everywhere he looked as a cultural
theorist (if that is what we could call him) he saw the mul-
tiple at work. What he truly feared was the power of the sin-
gular narrative, here identified as progress, to crush the beauty
and uniqueness found in Chaosmos. The storm Benjamin saw
and ironically framed in the image of the angel, wings unfurled
as if pinned to a specimen board, was of a degraded
culture totally at the mercy of the singular narrative of
progress. The past in this reading becomes a burden, it has
nothing to offer the future. There is no place for the creative
traditionalist. The negative space around this image is where
we must look if we wish to locate the cultural citizen. Such an
individual is able to wake the dead, set the fox amongst the
chickens, perhaps even burn the house down. The creative
traditionalist is able, like Benjamin, to take elements of the
past and reconfigure them to enable future mutations in culture to occur that break the stranglehold of a set cultural order. We see this creativity at work in Benjamin's reframing of Paul Klee's image from an 'angelus novus' to an angel of history. The angel as icon, a powerful being, an object of adoration becomes powerless, totally at the mercy of the oncoming storm. 'Paradise', in Benjamin's hands, alerts us simultaneously to the Judeo-Christian teleological narrative of the fall and the end of times. Linear history at the mercy of a single narrative is dangerous; modernity has brought us all to the precipice (Bauman, 1991).

If we jump cultures and look to India we can find similarities to Benjamin's work in the thinking of Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1922–1990), Sarkar was a creative traditionalist who harnessed the ancient role of guru to release a wide range of socio-spiritual hacks into the lives of his followers and through them into Indian and later global culture. Like Benjamin, Sarkar was happy to reconfigure elements of his (Tantric) tradition into new forms. One such hack comes in the persona of the sadhaka, knower of truth, who activates cultural citizenship and hacks dominant cultural programming in order to release new possibilities into the social cycle (Sarkar, 1986). Sarkar, as a macro-historian, speaks of an emergent new age, claiming that we are now in a period of transition, a yoga sandhi, in which the contradictions of our civilisation are abounding and demanding of us a change that is not simply structural but ontological in nature. For Sarkar, there is no angel of history. Rather, there is awakened human consciousness of relationship with its rich lessons for sustainability, ethics and individual and collective identity. Much of the cultural baggage of the past reinforces human alienation, a disconnection from nature and from non-human beings in a maelstrom of competition and violence. We live in a state of narrative collapse in which old stories fail us and new ones are yet to emerge.

At this time on the earth humanity is witnessing such a yuga sandhi [transitional age]. On one side there is the rubbish heap of the past and people are clinging to that rubbish heap because they have not yet been shown the way out. And on the other side, there is the call of the new. Under such conditions what will that Mahasambhuti do who gave guidance to the human race in the past? With courage he will call to human beings and declare: “Give up the rubbish of the past. It can only harm you and lead you to your death. Move ahead. Answer the call of the new. I am with you. There is no reason to be afraid” (1986).

In a very clear way this statement takes us back to the field of the Kuruksetra as Lord Krishna was the mahasambhuti [great personality] of his age. The past, as in old identities, norms and habits, emmeshing vested interests and powerful distortions in both reason and action, is metaphorically represented by the Kauravas, whilst the new is to be found in the dharmic struggles of the Pandavas. Of course, the image of the Angel of History surrounded by the wreckage of the past leaps to mind. What is different is that Benjamin's work is tinged with a pessimism and weariness that is absent from Sarkar's teachings. Both however, demonstrate the possibilities inherent to cultural citizenship and creative traditionalism.

The takeaway here is that culture is never clean or pure; in fact, culture is very dirty. The exercise of creative traditionalism, in the best sense of the term, is hacking culture to release new possibilities and edit out the 'dirt' of the past — those
cultural and historical accretions that damage humanity’s capacity to generate optimal planetary futures.

Developing cultural citizenship requires a new politics of memory. To remember in the old ways will not do any more. Memory has been made historical for a start, and that is problematic, as history — especially as taught — is so often an exercise in separation from that which is remembered. Voyeurism becomes the goal and traditional politics dictates that we remember through structures and processes that remain unreflective, acquitting those remembering from any complicit dealings with the past. When considering creative traditionalism we must remember that traditions can be fossilised memories. They hold patterns of relating that can inform new dogmas and provide the comforts of old pathways in new garb. Bruno Latour (2017) argues this point when he confronts Modernity’s secular turn. Science is the new religion and is described by him as the ‘counter-religion’ of the present day. In this context, we have memory at work that fills the mind up with things but is unaware, and blind to the cultural patterning that scaffolds our readings of and responses to the world at large. Nature out there is the new deity as transcendent as any God.

“Whether we like it or not, we are the descendants of a division that obliges us to associate the supreme authority to which we entrust our fates with the question of truth. Even those who violently reject the monotheistic religions have borrowed from them this quite particular way of violently rejecting idolatry. Iconoclasm is our common good. From the true God fulminating against all idols, we have moved to the true Nature fulminating against all the false gods. The division has remained, as has the lightning, the thunder, and the smell of the storm.” (2017, p. 157).

There is that storm again! The storm called progress that promises much in terms of human emancipation and it has delivered; but at what cost? Both the metaphysical and the material seem shriven of some elemental virtue associated with living, embodied being. The baby has been thrown out with the bath water. To see this clearly, we need to step back a bit and see how culture functions as both an evolutionary response to humanity’s need for order and as a driver in the ongoing work of making that meaning sustainable into the future (Bussey, 2017a). Sustainability is not just about maintaining what we have, it involves a creative rethinking of what we are as a species. To date, we have created a world on the premise that limits can be breached. But this is no longer the case. A new evolutionary imperative has arisen that speaks to us of interconnection, relationship and a very different story about what it means to be human.

Epistemologically this means we need to address the issue that Latour identifies above, that we as culture-pattern beings have simply translated our religious need for truth into a materialist one. Ontologically, mytho-poetically, we remain unchanged. Today we remain small, local beings who cannot fully comprehend our place in a planetary system of complex and evolving relationships. Only a century ago most of us thought in terms of communities of less than 500 people bounded within a local radius of perhaps 100 kilometers. If we were aspiring humanists we thought of justice for all people, but still struggled to think of humanity in the singular. Today we are faced with a relational cascade that now involves not just seven plus billion people but the entire planet: bios-
phere, pedosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, ethnosphere, technosphere. This is way beyond our capacity to comprehend. So, we tend to withdraw into denialism and tribalism.

Yet such pressure also pushes us beyond our small concerns and activates human creativity. Free, as many of us are, from the primary needs for security, shelter and food we can conduct multiple experiments all focused on new trajectories for sustainability. These experiments may be social or technological, but they are also just as likely to be experiments in identity in which spirituality and religion have a role. Thus, Bruno Latour in asking the question ‘quo vadis?’ offers us the ethic of humility:

...can we relearn to live in the time of the end without tipping thereby into utopia, the utopia that has beamed us into the beyond [science and politics], as well as the one that has caused us to lose the here below [religion]? In other words, can we return to humility three times in a row — for the sciences, for politics, and for religion — instead of the deadly amalgam that has mixed up their virtues but has succeeded only in poisoning us? (2017, p.285).

From the perspective of humility, we cease to long for the ‘Big Fix’ or ‘Silver Bullet’ to our problems but work across scales and cultures to foster more human worthy considerations such as friendship, justice, care and community; and not just for other humans, but for all beings and the materiality of this world upon which we all depend. This calls for what Gary Gardner (2006) dubs a ‘bounded creativity’ in which limits are in fact essential to any sustainable future. For me, this suggests a new human equation in which our humanity is premised on inter-being with all planetary citizens. Thus, cultural citizenship reaches out beyond cultural capital as tradi-

tionally understood and embraces natural capital in all its forms and all its stakeholders. Agency is then distributed through the systems of nested relationships that make up this planet (Foltz, 2003). In this way we become, as Latour argues, earth-beings acutely aware of our reliance on the whole. This is the ‘symbiotic real’ that Timothy Morton describes:

Relying-on is the uneasy fuel of the symbiotic real; this relying-on always has its haunted aspect, so that a symbiont can become toxic or strange-seeming relationships can form, which is how evolution works. The right word to describe this reliance discrete yet deeply interrelated beings is ‘solidarity’. Without the tattered incompleteness of the symbiotic real at every scale, solidarity would have no meaning. Solidarity is possible and widely available because it is the phenomenology of the symbiotic real as such. Solidarity is how the symbiotic real manifests, the noise it makes. Solidarity also only ‘works when it is thought at this scale (2017, p. 2).

Both humility and solidarity are fellow travellers in the emergence of a culture of inclusion. A new human dimension is emerging under the pressure of largely anthropogenic circumstances (Bussey, 2007). Morton offers us a particularly forceful description of this emergent awareness in the secular domain as he hacks various sacred Marxist assertions to release powerful new insights into the cultural domain. Yet for religions too, there is an emergent awareness being articulated in a range of interventions perhaps most notably the re-scripting of Catholic theology in the hands of Pope Francis and his 2015 encyclical Laudato Si which offers both humility and solidarity in good measure. The formulations of Latour, Morton and Pope Francis are all expressions of bounded creativity at work with limits that have been reached and breached in the
name of progress. Cultural citizenship here reaches out to reinvigorate relationship and open up dialogue between and across species lines, cultural fractures and planetary dynamics. The scales vary greatly but inter-relate and invite intimate engagement with processes both familiar and alien to us. This is exciting and challenging and culture is the basis from which the new emerges from the old, but only when we shake the bars of the cage and hack the programs that define.

Earth community is not a goal but a way of being in the world. It is worth closing these reflections by considering earth community and cultural citizens as key ingredients to any sustainable future. To be a cultural citizen is to be alive to the possibilities of culture. To listen, learn, nurture and seed possibilities. It is to find key elements of culture that can release new possibilities into the world and deploy them in culturally significant ways. Earth communities suggest a shift in the attention of the citizen away from the polis and towards gaia-centric forms of participation and co-creation. Such shifts occur in various human domains simultaneously: systems change to facilitate and mitigate; worldviews change to support and generate; narratives and metaphors arise from the subterranean depths of culture to energise and surprise. The cultural citizen works across these domains whilst appreciating that the everyday is often crowded and dislocated, fractured into small chunks of time that often seem disconnected and arbitrary. The image of the earth community is a narrative/metaphor hack at the root of the cultural tree. It suggests, as Latour notes, a worldview based on humility that triggers a reorientation in the systems expression where science, politics and religion no longer separate and dominate, but evolve collaborative partnerships and processes with all stakeholders invested in rich and inclusive planetary futures.

Elise Boulding argues that such changes are contingent upon the recriting of individuality and personhood. Her focus back in 1982 was ‘civic culture’ but her words can easily be translated to the ‘earth culture’ that underpins earth community with its relational consciousness.

For her, key considerations are time and depth. Thus, she notes:

It takes time to become a person. The civic culture, and the public interest, only develop where there are human beings with a fully developed sense of individual personhood. Self-centredness, the ‘Me Generation’, the ‘Me Nation’, come not so much from an excess of individualism as from an undeveloped individuality, a failure to experience the depths of the differentness and otherness which surround us, a failure to learn to live with difference creatively. Learning takes time. Everything we have been talking about which can contribute to the building of a world civic culture involves learned behaviour — involves learning new behaviours (1988, p. 162).

The whole point of this learning is to repair, reorganise and reinvest the human story with the narrative power to move beyond the loss of magic that has accompanied our experience of being modern. I am convinced that Kate Tempest is right when she says, in the opening lines to this chapter, ‘we are at our best when we mean it’. We are the ‘brand new ancients’ she evokes so skilfully in her narrative poem of that name (Tempest, 2015). As ancients we are potentially gods, having the power to create the world not in our image but in the interests of our earth community. This is an ancient magic that draws upon our paleolithic capacity to enchant the
world with meaning beyond resource and economy (Martin, 1992). As cultural citizens, we are licensed to explore our traditions free of their baggage yet alert to the deep wisdom present in tradition itself. Culture is certainly dirty, laden with layers of broken stories and false gods; yet it is our database and only it provides direction for the future. Why is this? It is because culture is all we have to inspire, fuel imagination, initiate narrative transformation and ignite, through its organic and dynamic nature, alternative futures. It is the field of action and struggle that we share with Arjuna and like him we must move from indecision and doubt to firm action on behalf of our earth community. The epic continues!

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References


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