

A Postcapitalist Politics of Dwelling: Ecological Humanities and Community Economies in Conversation

Gerda Roelvink and J.K. Gibson-Graham

Introduction: How do we live together with human and non-human others?

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively. We struggle to adjust, because we're still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and 'dead' nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies. The real threat is not so much global warming itself, which there might still be a chance to head off, as our own inability to see past the post-enlightenment energy, control and consumption extravaganza we so naively identify with the good, civilized life—to a sustainable form of human culture. The time of *Homo reflectus*, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come. *Homo faber*, the thoughtless tinkerer, is clearly not going to make it. We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all. (Plumwood, 'Review' 1)¹

This powerful statement opens Val Plumwood's review of Deborah Rose's book *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* published in the *Australian Humanities Review* in August last year. We begin this essay with it because we wish to engage with the ideas of Plumwood, Rose and other feminist ecological humanities scholars as we ponder the question of how to live together with human and non-human others.

Plumwood's call follows anthropogenic crises that have become all too familiar. A BBC documentary 'Global Dimming' demonstrates the overflowing nature of such crises and provides a shocking wake-up call about global responsibility. It tracks how the Ethiopian famine that killed ten million people in the early 1980s resulted from the failure for more than a decade of the yearly monsoon. This catastrophe was caused as the water-laden tropical air mass was prevented

¹ Recent scientific evidence suggests that Plumwood is perhaps too sanguine about our chances of heading off global warming (Flannery).

from moving northward by Europe's spreading pollution haze. A PBS documentary 'Dust Busting' tracks how dust blowing across the Atlantic from the Sahel desert has produced coral reef death and marked increases in rates of asthma in the Caribbean, a condition suffered particularly by children. In a sinister parallel to the Amazonian butterfly whose flapping wings contribute to a distant tornado, driving cars to get to work to make a living, support a family and produce profits for the corporate sector in northern Europe has resulted in Ethiopian farmers being deprived of a living and increases in childhood and coral sickness in the Caribbean.

Capitalist industrialization the world over, but predominantly in the global north, has extracted vast quantities of surplus value from working people, and comparably vast quantities of non-renewable resources from nature. 'Drunk on oil', as Gore Vidal describes the wasteful extravagance of the last century, our economies have depleted the natural environment upon which life depends and damaged the ability of distant others to sustain non-capitalist livelihoods. Those of us who have benefited from increased consumption have been shielded by our geography from the worst effects of the drawdown of our environmental commons—though we have only to open our eyes to see species extinction at our back door.

Contemporary eco-economic crises suggest that we can no longer think about economic growth as an infinite human project. The scientific evidence for, and widespread popular acceptance of, global climate change is a daily reminder that the drive for economic growth, fuelled by capitalist profit-making, is not sustainable. Examples of complex interdependence, such as those above, could be multiplied many times over if we cared to turn our minds to the task. Perhaps we don't because of the dismay this exercise produces, or the guilty paralysis it induces. J.K. Gibson-Graham argues that these emotions of resistance stand in the way of reparative action that generates hope and engages new possibilities (*Postcapitalist Politics*). Plumwood urges us to abandon *homo faber* and become *homo reflectus*. We ask here, what might it take to become the different kinds of humans/humanity that are required for ethical living in the anthropocene?

Val Plumwood died last year and was buried on her beloved land a few metres from the coastal escarpment directly east of Canberra. For a number of years we had been dreaming of a workshop in which a group of feminists interested in rethinking economy would sit down with the Australian 'goddesses' of feminist ecological rethinking to explore our connections and inspirations and thereby extend and strengthen our parallel projects—all of which circulate around the question raised above. Dreams get forgotten, and though this one was never far from our minds, it was waylaid by ill-health and circumstance—much to our regret. But as Val was lowered into the earth, a butterfly hovered over the grave and the baton was handed on. It was time to move forward with these questions

and the conversation between her work and ours that had already begun in so many ways.

In this essay, we document the beginnings of this conversation and suggest where it might go. We start by demonstrating the ways in which ecological thinking has already informed the project of rethinking economy and, in particular, the work of J.K. Gibson-Graham. We continue the conversation by making explicit the connections between Plumwood's understanding of place and our idea of the community economy. We then draw inspiration from ecological humanities scholarship to develop a post-humanist perspective on community economies that might help us participate in economic life in a way that recognizes and responds to implicated human and non-human others.

Ecology and economy

A conversation between economic and ecological scholars has been central to feminist rethinking of the economy. Concerned by representations of capitalism as naturally hegemonic, Gibson-Graham embarked on a project to deconstruct capitalocentric representations that construe all economic practices 'as being fundamentally the same as (or modeled upon) capitalism, or as being deficient or substandard imitations; as being opposite to capitalism; as being the complement of capitalism; as existing in capitalism's space or orbit' (*The End of Capitalism* 6). The project draws on the work of other feminist economic scholars including Nancy Folbre ('A Patriarchal Mode'; *The Invisible Heart*), Hazel Henderson and Marilyn Waring who highlight the invisible economies of care, informal market and non-market activities, and gifts of nature that make up our economic existence. Gibson-Graham's alternative representation is a 'diverse economy' comprised of many different

- market, alternative market and non-market **transactions**,
- ways of performing and remunerating **labour**, and
- **enterprises** with distinctive ways of appropriating and distributing surplus labour (including capitalist, feudal, communal and independent businesses).

'Diverse economies' is a performative research programme that opens up a wide range of possibilities for experimentation and ethical debate about the provisioning of individual and social needs (*Postcapitalist Politics*; 'Diverse Economies').

Ecological thinking with its central acknowledgement of eco-diversity has provided creative inspiration for this re-presentation. Scholars of diverse economies have been especially interested in using new ecological thinking to challenge the ways in which economic dynamics of change are theorized. In particular, theories of complexity and non-equilibrium systems call into question unidirectional and essentialist assumptions about economic development. In thinking about alternative development dynamics, for example, Gibson-Graham

(‘Diverse Economies’ 625) draws on Jane Jacobs’ extension of ecological thinking to the economic domain. Jacobs asks us to abandon the economists’ view of the ‘supernatural’ economy and to recognize economies as akin to natural systems that ‘require diversity to expand, self-refuelling to maintain themselves, and co-developments to develop’ (Jacobs 143-44). This has led Gibson-Graham to foreground

- economic diversity (including diverse class processes and forms of surplus appropriation) as a possible way of strengthening the resilience of local economies, and
- ethical choices, rather than structural imperatives, as key drivers of economic transformation.

In exploring the practicalities of local economic development in the context of research interventions in the Philippines, Gibson-Graham (‘Surplus Possibilities’) has also been influenced by Rose’s thinking about the impacts of human actions on the resilience of nature. We can apply this thinking to consider the resilience of diverse non-capitalist economic practices. Rose distinguishes

- anti-resilience actions that destroy ecosystems—such as dams, plantation forests, monoculture;
- engineered resilience that forces nature to behave as humans like—such as fire suppression in protected forests; and
- resilience facilitation that enables ecosystems to flourish—such as when place is left alone or when there is active engagement to resuscitate ecosystems (Rose 48).

In the economy, these actions are mirrored by

- anti-resilience actions that destroy the diverse economic practices that sustain well-being directly—such as imposing taxes or fees that must be paid in cash on subsistence livelihoods or appropriating land and forcing people to seek paid work;
- engineered resilience—such as defining diverse community practices as ‘social capital’ and using them as an input into micro-finance schemes or capitalist enterprise development; and
- resilience facilitation that supports the diversity of community-based economic practices of gifting, sharing, reciprocity and cooperation that deliver material and emotional support directly.

These three mirrored courses of action toward nature and economic diversity reveal some of the ethical choices we are faced with as we confront the question of how to live today.

In thinking about a diverse economy, we have been preparing the ground for a consideration of how to live together, or what we have called the ethical

dimensions of economic practice. In parallel with feminists in ecological humanities, we are interested in acknowledging and developing an ethics of care. Such an ethics is concerned with the question of how to enact our interdependence with each other and with nature in a manner that respects the other in all of its forms.

Place and the community economy

We have approached our ethical concerns through the lens of the ‘community economy’ as theorized by Gibson-Graham and discussed at length in *A Postcapitalist Politics*. The community economy is a performative project that reconstitutes the economy through ethical practices of coexistence that recognize and constitute the commonality of being. As a guide to economic ethics, Gibson-Graham extends a reading of Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on community as the ‘commonality of being’ (*Postcapitalist Politics* 81-2). For Nancy, the community is best approached not as a model, identity or essence but as the relationship of ‘being-in-common’ and the togetherness inherent in any notion of singular ‘Being’ (Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* 82). The community economy is thus not an economic form but rather the praxis of co-existence and interdependence.

Gibson-Graham specifies four coordinates around which being-in-common is economically negotiated:

1. what is *necessary* to personal and social survival,
2. how social *surplus*² is appropriated and distributed,
3. whether and how social surplus is to be produced and *consumed* and related questions about personal *consumption*,
4. how a *commons* is produced and sustained (*Postcapitalist Politics* 88).

The first three coordinates of coexistence and interdependence are informed by a Marxian account of surplus labour production, appropriation and distribution—the economic processes and flows that support and make possible a complex society. Under varying conditions surplus labour is extracted from producers and distributed to non-producing workers, pre-producers, post-producers, injured producers and others (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2000). Marx employed the concept of surplus to keep track of the invisible labour that supports lives, highlighting in particular the exploitative nature of surplus labour extraction within the capitalist class process. In performing a community economy the interdependence of different kinds of labour is a matter of consideration in all economic decisions. The fourth coordinate involves the interdependence between humans and nature and draws attention to the socially

² The term social surplus has been proposed as a way of thinking about the aggregation of various forms of surplus labour produced within all the different class processes making up a society (capitalist, communal, independent, slave and feudal) (DeMartino 2003; Gibson-Graham *Postcapitalist Politics*).

mediated relations of access to and care of the environmental commons. The Marxian tradition's preoccupation with a labour theory of value has made it difficult to account for the contributions to society's survival made by a range of non-labouring humans and non-human 'others'. Yet a community economy must be able to acknowledge that what appears to be surplus is often constituted, in part, by drawing down the environmental commons, often of those in distant places.³ This is a point that Val Plumwood helps us to think about ('Shadow Places' 3).

Our understanding of the community economy as a relationship between 'Being' and 'being-in-common' resonates with eco-feminist reworkings of the idea of bioregionalism, especially Plumwood's work on an ethics of place ('Shadow Places'). In her posthumously published essay 'Shadow Places and the Politics of Place' she takes us beyond the dualist separation of materially supportive places and places of personal attachment. She asks us to think about attachment to place not in terms of a particular identity or group but as an attachment to all that supports one's life. In 'Shadow Places' Plumwood directly contrasts a "'community" version of individualism' with her vision of the 'community in relationship with others' ('Shadow Places' 7). Drawing on indigenous concepts such as 'country' that convey this sense of place, Plumwood asks,

What is the effect then of starting from the other, materialist end and taking this indigenous concept of country...as a criterion of 'your place', so that *'your place' is those parts of the earth that 'grow you', that support your life?...*The indigenous criterion reveals, as *denied or shadow places*, all those places that produce or are affected by the commodities you consume, places consumers don't know about, don't want to know about, and in a commodity regime don't ever need to know about or take responsibility for. ('Shadow Places' 6; emphasis in the original)

Plumwood provides an approach through which an ethics of place can be practiced. She calls on us to 'honour' all that supports our life:

Think what it would mean to acknowledge and honour all the places that support you, at all levels of reconceptualisation, from spiritual to economic, and to honour not just this more fully-conceived 'own place' but the places of others too. Such a program is politically radical, in that it is incompatible with an economy of privileged places thriving at the expense of exploited places. Production, whether from other or self-place, cannot take the form of a placed-degrading process, but requires a philosophy and economy of mutual recognition. ('Shadow Places' 7)

³ This is true for exploitative and non-exploitative enterprises—including capitalist firms, worker collectives, and independent producers. Because the contributions of the environment are not taken into account, in practice (though not conceptually or in Marx's philosophy) they end up in the residual we identify as 'surplus'.

She offers the principle of recognition as a guide for the ethical consideration of interdependence. Applying this principle to the practice of everyday life, she considers the question of meeting our daily needs:

a judicious combination of local and non-local production and care seems the most likely as well as the most sustainable outcome. This means sourcing more of our needs from local land, using forms of discount for the local perhaps, and extending public and political forms of care and value to those non-local areas our production and consumption impact upon—for example by giving value and standing to distant land and its ecological services and taking some social responsibility for its maintenance. But we have many options other than self-sufficiency for the mix here.

To envisage these options, think about the difference between the ideals of growing all your own vegetables in your own garden, versus participating in a community garden, in Consumer Supported Agriculture, or in a cooperative working for trade justice, as contrasting and potentially complementary routes to place accountability. ('Shadow Places' 7-8)

Recognition of interdependent economic action involves accounting for both the labour of others, as well as the places/'country'/environments/non-human others that support our lives. We are interested in developing an ethics of surplus that takes these hidden constituents of production and survival into account. Eco-feminist research helps us to extend the community economy coordinates to include relationships between human and non-human 'earth others'.

Toward a post-humanist ethics of community economy

Our rethinking of the community economy acknowledges the blurred boundaries of humans, the natural environment and others that make life possible and shape the character of life. We have begun to rethink the community economy in a post-humanist way, seeing it as a performative outcome of an array of interdependencies, between humans, environments and non-human entities. This reframing displaces humans as the sole agents of ethical decision-making. Yet how to include non-humans into processes of decision-making remains a central challenge.

Eco-feminist scholarship has supported us in extending our analysis of the diverse economy to recognise the hidden constituents of surplus production, appropriation and distribution. Through this extension, we have reframed the coordinates of the community economy to take into account the intertwined entities involved in living together—what geographer Sarah Whatmore (159) has termed 'relational ethics'. Here we pull out some of the ethical actions that

might be a precondition for living in the world in a 'different mode of humanity' (Plumwood, 'Review' 1).

Necessity

Decision-making about *necessity* must not only be relevant to the human body and its culturally conditioned needs but also must consider the needs of other entities that are part of the overdetermined process of production in a community economy. Research in the ecological humanities has enabled us to recognize and consider some of these diverse forms of necessity. Jessica Weir (2008), for example, represents rivers as an active force capable of replenishing themselves provided they are not denied water. She suggests that agricultural production in South Australia take into account the water that is necessary for river systems to sustain themselves. When the food needs of humans conflict with the needs of rivers, the ability to sustain agriculture is undermined.

Deborah Rose documents how Aboriginal peoples' needs for water and their ability to replenish themselves were denied by colonial pastoralists who predicted Aboriginal people would 'die out or be assimilated, and thus did not expect to have to share land, politics and history with them' (Rose 84). Rose shows how in conflicts over water in Australia, colonial pastoralists were able to recognize the co-implication of water, cattle and colonial settlement while at the same time believing that their society could not coexist with Aboriginal peoples (84). While Aboriginal peoples were figured as less than or non-human, cattle were seen as 'non-human members of these conquering societies' and "'clearing the land" in the context of colonising pastoralism meant eradicating or subduing the natives in order to make room for cattle' (84). The needs of cattle in production were thus privileged over Aboriginal needs. Rose's account suggests that we can see cattle as 'agents of colonisation in their own right as they impact on the ecologies they encounter', bringing enormous changes such as land degradation and threats to ecological resilience (85). Careful consideration of the diverse labours involved in economic life shows the way in which some needs (such as those of cattle) are provided for while others are undermined (such as those of rivers and Aboriginal peoples). A post-humanist reading of economic activity extends the right of compensation to a range of human and non-human others.

A post-humanist community economy might also imagine different ways of meeting diverse needs. Plumwood's essay 'Decolonising Australian Gardens' (2005) offers wombat lawn-mowing as an example of 'interspecies garden ethics', but it could also be seen as an example of a community economic practice that recognizes non-human needs, values non-human economic inputs and places a brake on consumption. In her garden Plumwood welcomed wombats to graze and as a result did not need a motorised lawnmower. 'Making a space for wombat lawnmowers', she wrote, 'is an example of adaptive and mutually beneficial gardening mode which negotiates with a prior presence, since what benefits the

wombats also benefits me' ('Decolonising' 7). Might there be other interspecies production activities that provide for diverse needs and foster respectful interdependence?

Surplus

Non-human others and non-labouring others are also implicated in the production and appropriation of *surplus*. The contributions of the environment to industrial agriculture, manufacturing and services are rarely taken into account, yet these 'gifts' turn up in the residual surplus that is left over after the direct (labour) and indirect (machinery and raw materials) costs of production have been met. Underpinning the production and appropriation of surplus is the unremunerated exploitation and degradation of the environment. Rose's research in New South Wales shows how the clearing of forested land for intensive agriculture threatens the existence of a number of communities—the Aboriginal community whose life is intertwined with the forest, the 'self-supporting' farming community that 'collapsed' as farming was scaled up and intensified, and the animal and plant ecosystems that form forest communities (Rose 205). These 'costs' (or 'externalities' in the language of mainstream economics) are rarely accounted for, yet they contribute to the magnitude of the surpluses generated by agricultural production.

One farmer who values the interdependent relationships between diverse plant, animal and human communities has chosen to leave a large proportion of land uncleared, though it reduces his cash income (Rose 204). This farmer is making an ethical decision to recognize and respect the place, along with its human and non-human others, that supports his living. Accepting a lower economic return on investment, he gains reciprocated respect from the human and non-human others with whom he shares a dwelling place. Like this farmer, pastoralists are currently reorienting away from 'maximum extraction' of water from river systems (and maximum surplus generation and profits) to 'working with' the flows of floods and dry periods so that their agricultural production process can be rebalanced with natural processes (88). By recognizing nature's gifts and the thefts that contribute to surplus generation we are able to make ethical decisions about what levels of surplus production are environmentally healthy, socially and naturally just and sustainable. Bringing these considerations to the fore is part of occupying place through a different mode of humanity.

Consumption

The coordinate of *consumption* highlights the different ways that surplus and other wealth might be consumed by both businesses and individuals and the implications this has for human and non-human others. The pressure to produce profits pushes capitalist producers to limit so-called 'productive' consumption, that is, inputs into further production. Whatmore shows how cost-cutting on

animal food, animal care and housing to maximize profits can result in diseases, such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy/Mad Cow Disease-Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease, which threaten entire industries and undermine the broader health commons. The quality of animals' consumption and living conditions are increasingly informing human consumers' decisions over which kinds of products to purchase, such as free range and organic foods (Whatmore 164). Whatmore's study of mad cow disease suggests that markets have been reframed by a new ethical concern for animal wellbeing, with organic and GM-free markets as examples of this reframing.

Fair trade networks are another example where First World consumers are beginning to take into account the quality of life of distant others and the relationship between cheap products and the survival needs of Third World producers (Roelvink 155). Worker-owned cooperatives often practice a relational ethics by consciously distributing some profits (surplus) to the community that supports their existence. The Big Carrot was established as a worker-owned cooperative supermarket in 1983 and is today 'Toronto's largest worker owned natural food market'. The cooperative is guided by a 'commitment to both natural foods and the building of a democratic workplace' (Big Carrot). Sally Miller relates how in 2000 the Big Carrot co-operators decided not to stock genetically modified foods. This decision emptied an enormous amount of food products from the shelves. Despite reducing the food available, the decision was a commercial success with consumers making the ethical choice to support the Big Carrot and foster the production of non-GM food (Miller 2008).

A post-humanist community economy brings the intertwined nature of economic life to the foreground in decision-making around consumption. This enables the social and environmental implications of individual, enterprise and social consumption to be explored and ethically negotiated.

Commons

Finally, as the other areas of economic coexistence demonstrate, our rethinking displaces the human as the sole caretaker of the *commons* and leads us to consider the role of non-humans in making and sharing a commons. The 'self-repairing' actions of the natural environment (Rose 207) are surely part of the making of a commons. And the symbiotic relationship between humans and non-human entities are surely a sharing of the commons. A post-humanist community economy recognizes nature and non-human entities as actively participating in making and sharing a commons (Gudeman 27) and thus constituting community alongside humans.

Conclusion: Choosing a reparative stance and a posture of openness

Our project to rethink the community economy in a post-humanist way, seeing it as a performative outcome of a collective of interdependencies including nature and non-humans, requires a different approach to ethics. Eco-feminist scholarship has aided us here in thinking about an ethics that recognizes intertwined entities living together. Such an ethics requires a sensitivity to all that is implicated in economic performances, a sensitivity that has a number of dimensions. Plumwood, for instance, highlights the importance of stance and posture in how we relate with others (*Environmental Culture*). This resonates strongly with Gibson-Graham's work to cultivate herself as a 'theorist of possibility' by consciously adopting an open stance:

the kind of choices we continually make about *what to do* and *how to act* in particular situations are also required of us as thinkers. These include the stances we adopt, the affective dispositions—that color our thinking and impinge on consciousness as feeling—practical curiosity and openness to possibility, for example, or moral certainty and the acceptance of constraint. (*Postcapitalist Politics* xxix; emphasis in the original)

Gibson-Graham inhabits a reparative stance that 'welcomes surprise, entertains hope, makes connections, tolerates coexistence and offers care for the new' (*Postcapitalist Politics* 8). She suggests that such a stance is useful for enlarging economic possibilities and our possibilities of connecting with others.

Plumwood's work helps us extend the connection with others to 'earth others':

What is required in order to be 'a receiver' of communicative and other kinds of experience and relationship is openness to the other as a communicative being, an openness which is ruled out by allegiance to reductive theories. To view such differences as simply 'theory choices' is to overstate the intellectualist and understate the performative aspects involved, which is captured somewhat better in the terminology of posture or stance. Is it to be a posture of openness, of welcoming, of invitation, towards earth others, or is it to be a stance of rejudged superiority, of deafness, of closure? (*Environmental Culture* 175-76)

Stance is a vital part of Plumwood's communicative ethics in which communication is broadly understood to encompass a range of sensitivities. Putting the receptive stance into practice involves being sensitive to the intentionality and agency of others (*Environmental Culture*). An open, receptive stance allows for the appreciation of the great variety of beings our economies enable, not just humans but all 'earth others'.

Leo Tolstoy wrote that 'Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself'. Feminism actually has thought about changing the self, and Val Plumwood's life was led by changing herself in accordance with her evolving beliefs. She is a guide for us as we continue to navigate living together.

Gerda Roelvink is an interdisciplinary scholar who works at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy and is a visiting fellow at the Australian National University. She has published articles in Studies in Political Economy, Social Identities and the Journal of Cultural Economy.

J. K. Gibson-Graham is the pen name of Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham, feminist economic geographers who work, respectively, at the Australian National University and the University of Massachusetts. They are the authors of A Postcapitalist Politics, The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It) and Class and Its Others.

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