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Nature and the Unlovable

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> Abstract • Can our relationship with nature be loving and reciprocal? The claim is hard to sustain when nature is taken to encompass polluted and urban places. The notion of reciprocity loses its force, and the lovability of these places is put into question. Also, the demand of love may obscure the ethical demand in our relationship with nature: to be responsible in our meaning-making practices.

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« 1 » Contemporary philosophy is moving away from simplifying views of love as a mere mental phenomenon, and towards a more complex notion of love as interaction and mutual shaping of perspectives. Laura Candiotta applies her own view within this approach (Candiotta & De Jaegher 2021) to her account of love of nature by loving a place. For Candiotta, love is participatory sense-making: loving a place is a reciprocal encounter, accomplished by listening to the place and being listened to in return. Her contribution is also in line with an innovative approach within environmental ethics, where several authors have argued that nature can be an active participant in a reciprocal loving relationship.¹

« 2 » Candiotta rejects the notion of love of nature as a love of some universal, uniform, and vague ideal that characterizes many environmentalist views. Instead, it is a love of the particular (§§8–10, 26, 29); love of nature is thus erotic (§§19, 22). In philosophy, the term “erotic” has often referred to love that is particular and reciprocal, as opposed to “agapeic” love, which is universal and unilateral. Being particular means that erotic love is grounded on the qualities that make a specific person who she is. While erotic love is grounded on the person’s qualities, in agapeic love, the person

1 | For example, Bryan Bannon (2017) argues that our relationship with nature should be that of reciprocal friendship.

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is merely a vehicle for love of humanity as a whole. This is why, for Candiotta, love of nature is rooted in quality-based (i.e., erotic) love of place.² Loving a place is loving *that* place for what it is, and that is loving nature. This is a novel and interesting view, which, in principle, allows for a more comprehensive conception of nature that overcomes the division between nature and culture (§25), and allows love of nature to include love of cities (§43). Too often, environmentalist discourse has called (implicitly or explicitly) for a return to pristine, untouched nature. Esme Murdock (2019: 303) calls this “discriminatory biocentrism,” which not only excludes humans from environmental concerns, but specifically vulnerable humans – such as working-class city residents or displaced Native communities. In this sense, Candiotta’s view is urgent and important.

« 3 » For Candiotta, loving consists in knowing what the place is through active listening – instead of just unilaterally making up our minds about what that place is or should be. Although Candiotta’s examples are mainly of places in wild nature (§§8, 24, 36), she also discusses the example of a polluted river. When encountering a polluted river, we may become aware that something has gone wrong in our relationship with the place, a “story of violence” that should drive us to amend the harm we – human beings – have inflicted (§36). We can only become aware of this harm by listening to the place; the river has already listened to us by becoming polluted (§41). We have, then, a definition of “listening” that is figurative and – since listening is not the same process for human beings as it is for elements of nature – that can be instantiated by different mechanisms (cf. the concept of “multiple realizability” in mainstream philosophy). This sort of definition is necessary to see love of nature as reciprocal, since it would be hard to defend the idea that nature can listen in the literal sense – as Candiotta herself admits (§41). Her description of listening incorporates an ethical demand, which I understand as a demand to listen to nature’s needs. I argue that this element of reciprocity and the subsequent ethical demand is in

2 | However, see Sam Shpall (2018) for an illuminating view of love for an ideal that does not generalize.

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tension with the incorporation of non-pristine nature into environmental discourse.

« 4 » The worry here is that we cannot love some places for their qualities. The polluted river is a dirty, inhospitable, violent place: if love is to be based on its traits, which is a requirement for this love to be erotic, the polluted river is unlovable. One response to this worry would be that we are unable to see the qualities of the river, since in virtue of being polluted the river is lacking the qualities for which we should love it (pristine, clean, peaceful and full of life, for example). How can we then love the river for its qualities, without projecting our own interpretation and thus making the relationship unilateral? We can only do this by listening to the river – by *loving* the river. However, the challenge remains if we look at a less clear-cut case. Say, for example, that one has an encounter with a huge car park, built where there used to be a forest. Unlike the river, which is polluted but is still there, the forest simply is no more. There is only the car park. That is what this place *is*. We can still look at the car park and acknowledge the harm that has been done, or grieve for the lost forest. However, we cannot do this by listening to the place that we have in front of us. We can only acknowledge the history of violence by bringing in our own interpretation of what we see. This interpretation is necessarily unidirectional, and not reciprocal.

« 5 » Let us take this problem further by considering the hot, littered, asphalt-covered streets of a non-affluent European neighbourhood. As an example, I choose Vallecas, a suburb in Madrid located in the site of a former valley with multiple meadows, creeks, and rivers. Vallecas started as a small human settlement that evolved into a village, then a town, and was ultimately absorbed by the city of Madrid. Now there is little of the valley left, only human-made buildings. After the Spanish civil war in the 1930s, the neighbourhood turned into a slum, and although some parts have been regenerated, it is still a neglected area. At the same time, Vallecas has an important anti-fascist history (the artillery damage from the war is still visible in its walls); a strong sense of community; and an indelible identity as a working-class, socially and politically engaged neighbourhood. It is certainly a lovable place. However, at some point in its history, the creeks in the area looked pretty

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1 much like Candiotto's polluted river – be-
 2 fore they were permanently covered with
 3 asphalt. Indeed, many parts of Vallecas do
 4 not look very different from the car park
 5 in my example. The story of Vallecas is the
 6 story of countless urban places around the
 7 world where the notion of reciprocal lis-
 8 tening seems to lose its meaning. I am not
 9 refuting that we can listen to these places,
 10 but these places cannot listen to us back in
 11 the way suggested by Candiotto. Recall that
 12 we are to understand that the polluted river
 13 has listened to us by becoming inhospitable.
 14 However, how has the car-park site listened
 15 to us? How have the hot and littered streets
 16 of a culturally rich suburb listened to us?
 17 Candiotto's view of the river's reciprocity
 18 does not seem available in these cases, not
 19 the least because it is not clear *what* is doing
 20 the listening in each case: the place that is
 21 now, or the bygone pristine nature that the
 22 car park and the streets have substituted?
 23 **Q1** Although we may acquire a great deal
 24 of understanding while interacting with a
 25 place like Vallecas, this will be done by our
 26 own interpretation of the place's history and
 27 identity, which is an interpretation by other
 28 *people* of what *people* have done. The place
 29 has not listened to us: we have made it what
 30 it is, in its goodness and its badness.

31 « 6 » This takes us to the next challenge.
 32 The ethical demand of love, understood as
 33 love for a particular place, is not general-
 34 izable. Interacting with polluted or urban
 35 places inevitably reveals that the river, the
 36 forest, and the meadows are no more, or
 37 have been overtaken by these new places.
 38 As noted above, we seemingly have the re-
 39 sponsibility to amend the harm done. Yet
 40 what are we to make of this responsibility
 41 when interacting with polluted and/or ur-
 42 ban places? It cannot be a return to pristine
 43 nature: that would conflict with Candiotto's
 44 rightful rejection of dualism between nature
 45 and culture. In §43, she says that love of cit-
 46 ies “should not be an excuse for not taking
 47 responsibility for structural violence.” She
 48 seems to address the criticism I am making
 49 here about pristine versus polluted/urban
 50 places, saying that we should not “reduc[e]
 51 action to preserve ‘the environment,’” and
 52 we should care about the place's inhabitants
 53 as well. However, if we label the creation of
 54 urban places as a “story of violence,” are we
 55 not implying that human intervention is to

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be conceptualized as violent? Can we then
 speak of love of cities at all? And are we not
 falling into discriminatory biocentrism? **Q2**
 Candiotto's response to the tension I am
 noting is that the ethical requirement here is
 “to put the *place* at the center, the inhabited
 space of human and nonhuman beings and
 their relationships” (§43, emphasis in origi-
 nal). However, this needs more elaboration.
 Even setting aside the challenge I have pre-
 sented with respect to reciprocity, there is a
 dilemma behind the ethical demand for lov-
 ing engagement. If love of nature is quality-
 based, we need to love a place for what it is
 now. This would allow us to love places like
 Vallecas, but it would mean that we must ei-
 ther love the polluted river *as a polluted river*
 or that the polluted river is unlovable for
 what it is now. Hence, the demand to amend
 the harm would disappear. On the other
 horn of the dilemma, if we want to keep the
 ethical requirement of making amends for
 the harm done (which is in turn required for
 loving engagement), some places like Valle-
 cas are unlovable, since love requires letting
 a place be (§32) and we would not be able
 to do that – we would be obligated to “undo
 the harm.”

« 7 » Where does this leave us? I propose
 that we will be able to make better sense of
 the ethical demands of our relationship with
 nature if we recognize that places are what
 we make them to be. We make a place by our
interpretation of the place. As I mentioned
 above, we can (and we should) acknowl-
 edge the harm done to the polluted river
 and the destroyed forest. We can (and we
 should) acknowledge the value of humanity
 in places like Vallecas. Love of urban places
 should not be diminished by knowing that
 a place is not the place that it once was. Ad-
 mittedly, we may still love and interact with
 some places in the way Candiotto describes,
 but reciprocal love cannot be the ethical
 demand. We are the makers of meaning
 in our relationship with place. That means
 that meaning-making is not participatory,
 but that is fine: we still have responsibilities
 in our interaction with places. The ethical
 demand is to acknowledge our responsibil-
 ity to tell the stories of what human beings
 have done to (and in) these places which
 cannot be told by the places themselves. We
 are the ones who need to be responsible in
 our meaning-making. Candiotto's impor-

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tant contribution on love of place is, I hope, 1
 a further step towards an environmental 2
 ethic that has the urban as a main element, 3
 and not as an afterthought. However, we can 4
 only do this by seeing ourselves as the main 5
 meaning-makers, and taking responsibility 6
 for our interpretation of a place's identity 7
 and history, as Murdock beautifully puts it: 8

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 10 “The voices, narratives, and experiences of those 10
 living within and among urban environments are 11
 necessary [...] to theorize as well as populate the 12
 archives with narratives and histories of the won- 13
 derful, diverse, and resilient environments and 14
 communities found there. These narratives will, 15
 of course, include stories of injustice, but they will 16
 also include stories of triumph and natural beau- 17
 ty, as well as stories of community gardens, soup 18
 kitchens, backyard chickens, herbal medicines, art, 19
 worship, sport, and play.” (Murdock 2019: 311) 20

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