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The animal versus the social: rethinking individual and community in Western cosmology

Priscilla Stuckey

"The truth about stories," writes Cherokee-Greek novelist Thomas King, "is that that's all we are" (T. King 2003: 2). Our world suffers now from the ecological devastations of a warming planet, extinctions of species and degraded soils and waters, and from profound inequalities of race, gender and class within societies and enormous gaps between wealthy and poor countries. If stories are what we are, then the stories we have been telling ourselves must be profoundly broken. The fundamental tale we tell ourselves will need to change.

The origin story of modern Western culture is a tale with roots in both Genesis and Plato that reached its present form in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries in northwest Europe.[1] It is a story rarely told as a single unified tale, which tends both to conceal its existence and to render its authority irrefutable. The story developed across several domains of Western knowledge and weaves them into a conceptual whole, which is why my discussion ranges from theology to anthropology, from economics to philosophy, and from evolutionary theory to sociology.[2]

Providing a contrast to the Western story are the cosmologies of animist cultures, a few of which I highlight here in order to spell out some social and political implications of cosmologies that are relational at their core. My goal is to learn from these animist stories, a process that is fundamentally different from appropriation. Appropriation follows the logic of colonization: seeking control over human or more-than-human others. Learning from stories, by contrast, means using stories not for gain but for loss – for the loss of stable meanings and of foundations that once appeared secure. The hard work of change involves undergoing a "disorienting dilemma" that dismantles mastery and control and results in a transformed worldview (Mezirow 1991: 163).[3] An ethical, or non-colonizing, use of the stories (or worldviews) of others will evidence this receptive mode, this willingness to be acted upon, even disoriented, by the stories of others. It will involve putting stories to work in the service of social transformation and increased justice between humans and with the more-than-human world. A pressing question at this time is: what

can "how others live" teach us in the North and West about "living otherwise ourselves" (Robbins 2006)?

At its simplest, this essay is an inquiry into the modern Western conviction that nature, including human nature, is individualist, acquisitive and competitive, so that what is considered "animal" becomes opposed to what is regarded as "social". This conviction shares the features of all good origin stories: it organizes a people's knowledge about the world; it explains how things came to be this way, thus authorizing the present conceptual and cultural order; and it suggests how people must act (Yanagisako & Delaney 1995: 1–2).[4] But to explore this larger cultural story, I begin with two personal stories.

THE PROBLEM OF DUALISM IN THE MODERN WESTERN STORY

Fifteen years ago, when the following two events took place, I was already an animist, experiencing the members of the more-than-human world as active and communicating subjects, though the scholarly conversations on new animism and panpsychism were only beginning (Viveiros de Castro 1998a; Bird-David 1999; Mathews 2003; Clarke 2004; Skrbina 2005; G. Harvey 2006a, 2006b).

A doctoral student in religious studies, I had been shaped by a feminist analysis of the dualism at the heart of Western cultures. Feminist epistemologists had long argued that even seemingly objective forms of knowledge are inherently subjective (Lugones & Spelman 1983; Haraway 1988; Sandra Harding 1993) and had critiqued the scientific revolution for its reduction of a living earth to mechanical, dead matter (Merchant 1980; Shiva 1989). They had argued that this reductionism relied on a dualism of subject and object, spirit (or mind) and matter, culture and nature stretching from Plato through Descartes and down to our time, and had shown that such dualisms form the bedrock of interlocking systems of privilege and oppression that favoured male over female, white over black, reason over emotion, and human over nature (Ruether 1975; S. Griffin 1978; MacCormack 1980; Merchant 1980; Lloyd 1984; E. F. Keller 1985; Starhawk 1990; Y. King 1990; Plumwood 1993, 2002, 2009).

While writing my dissertation, I participated in two events that I thought much about at the time but could not completely understand. The first took place in an animal rehabilitation facility close to my home in Oakland, California, where I volunteered one afternoon a week feeding orphaned baby birds and caring for injured wildlife. One day a tiny red fox kit, a male, was brought into the centre, whimpering softly. An apparent orphan, he had been found by a well-meaning person who thought she was bringing him to the centre to be cared for and raised to adulthood.

What she didn't know was that just a few years earlier, the state of California, as well as the nation, had enacted laws to steer wildlife policy toward preserving native species. The rehab centre now practised a strict discrimination between native and non-native animals. A baby hummingbird or swift or robin received zealous care, with volunteers spending our daylight shifts dashing frenetically about the bird nursery administering never-ending feedings. But a starling or house sparrow received a different treatment: it was handed over to the staff member on duty, who would take it into the next room, place it in the blue plastic tub with two tubes leading to a tank, and turn on the gas. As European species, these birds could not be released again into the wild because they would

compete with native species for resources, and all such competition was to be removed to help the natives flourish.

So when the red fox kit was brought in that afternoon, a member of a species who belonged historically in the eastern half of the county – introduced to the West Coast in the late 1800s to boost the fur trade and now competing with the native, and more eco-logically fragile, gray foxes – the staffperson on duty was required to call the Department of Fish and Game. Within minutes, a van would arrive.

That day the staffperson was a young woman who clearly loved the animals, and so I was taken aback when she ordered me to leave the fox alone. The pup's crying was pitiful, soft but incessant. I could not listen without responding. I stepped past her and scooped the kit gently into my arms, petting him softly, amazed as I always was to be holding a wild animal – and this one an infant red fox with puppy-soft fur. He settled into my arms, his mewing slowly quieting to stillness.

The van arrived; a man from Fish and Game got out. He strode into the building and entered the next room. The young staffer looked at me with a warning in her eyes. I handed her the now-quiet baby, and she took him into the next room and closed the door. The switch was turned.

I understood the intent of the law, and still I felt shaken: what was this ease in snuff-ing out a life?

The ironies of course were glaring: a law to preserve native animals of this land had been passed by a government that had attempted genocide on the native humans of that same land. The conservation law was designed to protect wildlife yet did so by managing animals as if they were parts of a machine, switched on and off at human whim. The law mandated snuffing an individual's life in order to save a species, albeit a different one, and such disregard for individual life, enforced in the very animal nursery where we worked so feverishly to preserve the tiniest lives, grated harshly on the heart.

I was aware of the critique presented by animal rights theorists that a preference for species over individuals is enshrined in conservation policy; animal rights theorists have long criticized environmental ethics on this point (Hargrove 1991; Kheel 2008). But what exactly lay behind that conflict? Beyond noting the ironies, I could not make sense of what had taken place, and so after doing my own private grieving for the red fox kit, I moved on.

At about that same time, I attended a workshop led by a couple from West Africa, Malidoma Somé and Sobonfu Somé, of the Dagara people of Burkina Faso. The workshop centred on nature-based rituals of grief. About a hundred of us worked in small groups for much of the day to create altars to the elements of nature from simple objects such as stones and leaves and branches. In the corner devoted to fire, my group fashioned a struc-ture blazing with votive candles, aluminium foil and orange scarves. Then the roomful of us sang simple African chants and danced to the beat of drumming that lingered through the afternoon as each of us presented our own griefs at the altars of nature, supported by the presence of the community.

What I remember most clearly is what Malidoma and Sobonfu said at the start when they explained why we were going to spend so much time that day building community among ourselves. When a woman becomes pregnant in their village, they explained, eve-ryone looks around and wonders, Who is this person coming to join us? Villagers assume that the child is being sent from the ancestors to deliver gifts the village needs, and they speculate excitedly on what those gifts might be. Before the baby is born, elders of the

village meet with the pregnant woman, place her in a trance, and ask: Why is this person coming to join the community? Through her, the village learns which gifts the person will bring to the community. Perhaps she will have the fire of the ancestors burning brightly in her so that she can inspire others. Perhaps he will flow like water to smooth the rocky places between people.

It then becomes the job of the community to remember the child's gifts once she is born. The community exists, said Sobonfu and Malidoma, to help individuals remember their purpose.

I could not have been more astonished. This was a view of community alien to my experience, unimaginable. I was used to the American bootstrap mentality, where individuals are largely on their own to figure things out for themselves. Such extreme individualism makes for weak or sporadic communal ties, especially among urban dwellers. Individualism with its accompanying fear of communal authority reigns also at the level of national politics, where both major parties paint themselves as the champions of individual rights against the tyrannies of the other side.

I had experienced a different valuing of community in the Mennonite settings where I was raised, but this conception seemed no less problematic. Traditions of mutual aid were strong among my people, and in one progressive Mennonite congregation I participated in, young people received a great deal of support for developing and expressing their gifts. Yet that same group spoke of the purpose of community as "accountability", which seemed to lay bare the bones of the issue: that a group was needed to enforce individual goodness. Mennonite history was replete with stories of authoritarian church discipline – the boundary between church and world at times so strictly policed that an individual might be asked to sacrifice intimate or familial relationships, and to obey dictates of elders down to the length of sleeves on a woman's dress, to remain in good standing with the group.[5] The authoritarianism, rather than being at odds with American individualism, struck me as the other side of the same social coin. The larger problem was conceptions of individual and community that set the two in opposition to each other, fighting an endless battle.

I could hardly fathom a social order that organized itself otherwise, where community exists to nourish its members. Sobonfu described what it looks like in practice: in the village, when a child enters the room, the body of every adult turns toward her to welcome her and give her their full attention. Children need this complete attention, she emphasized, if they are to learn to honour their own gifts and share them with others.

This philosophy is outlined also by the Ghanaian-Canadian educator George Sefa Dei, who notes the absence in Afrocentric perspectives of the Western dichotomy between individual and community. "In the indigenous African view, the concept of *individual* makes sense only within the concept of *community.*" Many Africans cannot identify with the Western view; to them, "the dichotomy is not between the *individual* and community but between the *competitive individual* isolated from his or her community and the *cooperative individual* enriched by community" (Dei 1994: 12, original emphasis). In the traditional village, connection and belonging are paramount, with exchanges of gifts and services intended to increase the sense of interdependence among community members. Individuals' responsibilities to the community are matched by the community's responsibility to nurture individuals. Nourishment flows in both directions – from the individual to others and back again.

Hearing Malidoma and Sobonfu speak of a concept of community that held little of the tensions characterizing my experiences induced a moment of "disorienting dilemma". Being confronted by the stories of people whose culture arranged itself differently made real the possibility of alternative social patterns. It seemed no accident that I had been alerted to the individual–community facet of the dualistic problem by people from an animist culture, and it also seemed no accident that it took place close to the time I met the red fox kit. But exactly how the events were connected was a problem I did not return to for many years.

THE ANIMAL VERSUS THE SOCIAL: INDIVIDUAL–COMMUNITY DUALISM

It was Aldo Leopold's famous essay, "The Land Ethic", that brought the problem back into focus. Reading it for the first time, I discovered Leopold's ecocentrism, his call to move "from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (Leopold [1949] 1968: 204). Leopold urged respect for all other inhabitants of the land, which he suggested would mean extending our human sense of social obligation to the rest of the natural world. Farmers who once implemented only those ecological practices that yielded an immediate profit to themselves would need to implement practices that served the community but did not necessarily deliver personal profit. Ecology as a whole would have to move beyond enlightened self-interest as the motivation for action. Ecology, in other words, needed ethics.

Leopold's ecocentric standard for ethics is well known: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (*ibid.*: 224–5). But what did he mean by *ethics?* A paragraph near the beginning of the essay struck what seemed to me an odd note: "An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic, philosophically, is a differentiation of social from antisocial conduct. These are two definitions of one thing" (*ibid.*: 202). In the theological conversations with which I was familiar, ethics were guidelines on how to act, of course, but the word *limitation* rarely arose. Neither did *antisocial.* A different conversation was guiding Leopold's thinking.

The latter half of the paragraph revealed its genealogy: "Politics and economics are advanced symbioses in which the original free-for-all competition has been replaced, in part, by co-operative mechanisms with an ethical content" (*ibid.*). Shades of Hobbes were unmistakable, with his assumption that the natural human state is antisocial, a war "of every man against every man" resulting in a life that is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes [1651] 1985). Leopold was, as Callicott says, reading nature through Darwinian eyes, especially a Darwinianism "uncritically tainted with Hobbesian elements" (Callicott 1989: 86).[6] The implications of Leopold's thinking seemed dire: if ethics is the result of evolution, then cooperative behaviour is not innate to all but belongs only to the later stages of evolution. This would mean that nature in its origins is antisocial and that community is not natural; one has to override instincts to make it happen.

It was time to take a closer look at Darwin.

DARWIN'S STORYTELLERS: HOBBES AND MALTHUS

In 1862 Marx scoffed in a private letter to Engels:

> It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labor, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions," and the Malthusian "struggle for existence." It is Hobbes's "bellum omnium contra omnes" … [I]n Darwin the animal kingdom figures as civil society.(Quoted in Sahlins 1976b: 101–2)

Marx was only the first of many to recognize that Hobbes and Malthus, struggling with the gritty realities of English society during its transformation into a market economy, were theorists who deeply influenced Darwin.

Thomas Hobbes, shaped by the chaotic seventeenth century in England, was more frightened of social unrest than tyranny of a king, and he wrote his magnum opus, *Leviathan*, to argue for strong central government. The "state of nature" is terrifying; without some central and absolute authority, chaos rules because human nature cannot be trusted. Or rather, individuals can be trusted only to lust for power: "a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power that ceaseth onely at death" (Hobbes [1651] 1985: 161). Peaceful coexistence is impossible without central authority. "Againe, men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deale of griefe) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all" (*ibid.*: 185). It is not just the actual violence that constitutes the state of perpetual war; it is "the known disposition thereto" (*ibid.*: 186).

A grimmer, more jaundiced view of human nature can hardly be imagined. It begins in a cosmology of atomism, with reality made up of discrete individuals who can act only competitively. The individual precedes society in Hobbes's story; disconnection lies at the core of his universe, as it did that of the mechanical philosophers whose beliefs Hobbes was seeking to reconcile with religion (Martinich 1992: 15). The ruthlessness he found at the core of human nature was only too obvious during his lifetime, as the long tradition of English individualism (Macfarlane 1978) intensified during England's transition to a market economy, with more competition for jobs, greater competition among merchants for positions in the world market, famines, and political and religious upheavals. Manorial landowners were enclosing lands formerly farmed by tenants or serfs and converting them to pasture for the sheep whose wool was valuable to a suddenly opening foreign market. Displacement from land had resulted in higher rates of theft and violence. The England of Hobbes's time was rife with struggles for survival.

But the sense Hobbes made of it all was theological. And here is the irony of his life: that though he despised the Puritans for bringing about political anarchy and fled their revolution to live in exile with the royal family, Hobbes would promulgate the most basic tenet of the Puritan Calvinist faith, the idea that human nature is fallen. His "state of nature" was equivalent to the Calvinist view of Adam and Eve after being expelled from the garden: they lived a cursed existence, powerless to improve their lot, and passed their depravity on to all their descendants. Whatever his expressed doubts about religion, Hobbes was a thoroughgoing Calvinist (Martinich 1992; Gorski 2003).[7] His vision never deviated from the pessimistic view of the human soul "burdened with vices", as Calvin had taught, and "utterly devoid of all good" (quoted in Martinich 1992: 4).

Calvin (and Luther too) had learned his pessimism from Augustine, who had insisted on the total depravity of humans after the fall. The irony of the Reformers is thus that they could separate themselves from the late medieval Church (in their emphasis on grace for all) only by reviving that pillar of the early medieval Church, Augustine. As Sahlins rightly perceives, Augustine lies at the heart of the Western story of nature. In particular, Augustine's insistence on the corruption of human nature and, by extension, the corruption of the natural world as well, has been determinative. After the fall, taught Augustine, *non posse non peccare:* we cannot *not* sin. It is a self-hating view that is unusual among cultures; it "does not appear to be a general preoccupation of humanity", observes Sahlins dryly (1996: 396). While others trace their origins to gods, Western culture is unique in tracing its beginnings to ruthless savagery (Sahlins 1976b: 100). The conviction rests, Sahlins notes, on the idea of a God who resides outside nature and who created the world, not out of divinity, or even out of matter, but *ex nihilo*, out of nothing (Sahlins 1996: 396).

While Sahlins emphasizes Augustine's roots in Genesis, it must be said also that Augustine, to arrive at his assertion of universal depravity, had to read the story of the fall through the lens of Plato. The image in the *Phaedrus* of instinctive appetite as an unruly horse held in check by the charioteer of reason resided in the mental furniture of Neoplatonic culture, although Augustine, like other early Christians, exaggerated the distance between mind and body more than did other late-antique writers. The Greek dualism of mind and instinct, passing through Augustine, later the Reformers, and down to Hobbes, forms the bedrock of the modern notion that civilization can develop only when people rein in their natural desires and inclinations (see also Plumwood 1993: 43, 120–24).

Though pessimistic, to say the least, about human nature, Hobbes did see a natural check on all the violence. Because individuals are equal, and equally violent, they eventually arrive at an uneasy truce. Self-interest will balance out if everyone pursues it equally, though the better way remains the absolute power of a sovereign. The social contract thus consists of consenting to an absolute central authority to prevent the war for power and possessions waged by self-serving individuals.

Many of Hobbes's contemporaries were appalled by his dismal take on human nature, and not until after his death did Hobbes's story exert influence, preparing the ground for Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* a century later. Smith's positive valuing of self-interest as the engine of social harmony is a far turn from Hobbes's despairing view of warring individuals, yet common to both is the assumption that acquisitiveness and self-interest form the foundation of human nature. In Sahlins's words, "The Hobbesian vision of man in a natural state is the origin myth of Western capitalism" (Sahlins 1976b: 100). Hobbes's vision would also become the organizing centre of Darwin's theory of natural selection, which, as Sahlins observed, was present in almost all its parts in *Leviathan* (Sahlins 1976b: 101). And in our time the jaundiced eye of Hobbes is considered by many as so self-evident that those who depart from it are seen as unrealistic, and his pessimism about human nature is accepted as fact even by those who might be astonished to learn of its religious roots.[8]

By the time of Malthus, a hundred and fifty years after *Leviathan*, the industrial revolution was in full swing, and human misery resulting from the opened chasm between haves and have-nots had compounded accordingly. Though Malthus is usually read as the privileged economist patronizingly urging the poor to limit their fertility – and he

was this too – it is also said that he offered his theory of population growth because he wished to ameliorate the conditions of suffering for the lower classes. Whatever his motivations, Malthus put forward the theory that population increases geometrically while food supplies can increase only arithmetically. What therefore ensues is a "struggle for existence", a fight to the death over available resources. Hobbes's warring individuals seeking possessions and power became for Malthus tragic individuals struggling merely to survive. But fallen human sinfulness lay at the core also for the parson Malthus: sinful and sluggish humanity would not labour unless compelled to by a limited world. Food shortages were necessary to motivate people to work for a living (R. M. Young 1985: 73). The fault lay in nature itself, in these "deeper-seated causes of evil" found in "the laws of nature and the passions of mankind" (Malthus 1826: 3.2.3).

THE ANIMAL AND THE SOCIAL: DARWIN'S SYNTHESIS, DURKHEIM'S ANTITHESIS

Though they disagree on whether Malthus's concept of the "struggle for existence" matched Darwin's exactly, historians concur that when Darwin read Malthus the last piece of the evolutionary puzzle fell into place, namely, the *how*: evolution took place through natural selection defined as a struggle for existence (Bowler 1976; R. M. Young 1985: 80–88; Worster 1994: 149). By weeding out the less favourable variations and promoting the favourable ones, the environment could bring new species into being.[9]

And so the theory of competitive ruthlessness among humans passed into biology to help explain animal and plant life. Darwin accomplished a monumental task – reidentifying human beings with the rest of the natural world. But by locating his mechanism for evolution in the competitive individual, Darwin made Hobbes and Malthus come to seem natural as well.

After Darwin, the idea of the competitive, self-gratifying individual would pass back into social theory first as social Darwinism and then in a more generalized antithesis, articulated by Durkheim in the early twentieth century, between animal instincts and sociality. "The dualism of human nature", which Durkheim believed – wrongly – was universal, began for him not just in the separation of body and soul, but in the opposition between the two. "Our sensory appetites are necessarily egoistic," serving only the individual self, while the soul or mind serves more "impersonal" ends of disinterested morality (Durkheim [1914] 1973: 151). The personal and impersonal are inescapably opposed; "there is a true antagonism between them" (*ibid.*: 152). Every moral act (directed toward others) thus involves a sacrifice of personal, bodily satisfactions while every instinctive act to satisfy one's own physical needs must ignore a concern for others. "The result is that we are never completely in accord with ourselves for we cannot follow one of our two natures without causing the other to suffer" (*ibid.*: 153–4).

A starker opposition between self and others is impossible. Durkheim solved the problem in the way of Adam Smith, by redefining self-interested acts as moral ones (*ibid.*: 154). But his debt to Plato (and then Augustine and Augustine's early modern Protestant heirs) is clear: the conflict between individual and society rests on a dualism of body and mind, with the body coded as selfish and instinctive while only the mind or soul is able to connect, through reason, with the larger collective. Durkheim thus reified the chasm in

the Western imagination between individual and community: "society cannot be formed or maintained without our being required to make perpetual and costly sacrifices" (*ibid.*: 163). And he made it harder to consider, or even to see, the sociality of animals, for as (Cartesian) physical organisms only, they lack the capacity for mental reasoning that makes possible the collective.

This dualism of individual and community thus both rested on and recreated a theory of the natural world that identified animals with "brutishness", and especially with the brutishness peculiar to capitalism: that of individuals competing to survive – which itself rested on a theological assumption of fallen, self-serving human nature. In the Western story setting animal nature against social harmony, we project our economic practices onto animals and plants, and, "finding" there a fiercely competitive nature, we then reflexively apply it to ourselves – a self-reinforcing cycle of meaning that joins human and more-than-human worlds and appears to explain nearly every aspect of individual and social behaviour. In this hyperindividualistic tale, community is defined as unnatural, in the sense that it does not reside in the body or in the animal world but is made possible only through the (human) mind; community is an anthropocentric project achieved only by transcending and overcoming "animal" instincts. It then becomes the job of ethics, as Leopold understood it, to enforce "a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence", and the purpose of society becomes curbing the individual (animal's) anti-social behaviour. The Western definition of the antisocial subject results in an oppressive definition of society. As Sahlins summarizes it: "The complement of the Western anthropology of self-regarding man has been an equally tenacious notion of society as discipline, culture as coercion. Where self-interest is the nature of the individual, power is the essence of the social" (Sahlins 1996: 404).

When individual and social are thus opposed, individualism can become an act of resistance against coercive social power. And when the individual–social opposition is mapped onto the natural world, individuals can resist coercive power only by exercising their "animal nature", which involves identifying with a romanticized notion of the isolated, need-gratifying animal. In the capitalist framework within which these oppositions took shape, consumers can thus come to symbolize resistance to group authority, acting to gratify their (instinctive animal) needs against the power of a disciplining society. Corporations, through advertising, can encourage such resistance (by promoting individual consumerism as a form of romanticized animal instinct) while masking their own disciplinary force as arbiters of mass culture and policers of the boundary between those who profit and those who do not. Exploitative economic behaviours, such as amassing resources on behalf of the few, can be defended as "only natural", and private enterprise can come to seem a refuge from centralized social or governmental power.[10]

By way of Hobbes, Malthus, Smith, Darwin and Durkheim, I now could see how the two events that coincided in my life long ago were connected. The baby fox had been euthanized as a result of environmental policy – influenced directly by Leopold and the Durkheimian separation between individual and ethical actions – that emphasized, in Darwinian fashion, the competition between animals over food and resources. But that very emphasis on competition rested on defining individual and community as irreconcilably opposed to one another, a notion that, as Malidoma and Sobonfu had alerted me, was culturally specific; it was thoroughly situated in the politics, theology, science and economics of European history.

CHALLENGING THE MODERN WESTERN STORY

In the remainder of this essay I highlight cultural stories that challenge – and therefore provide alternatives to – that of the modern West. Some stories belong to indigenous peoples inhabiting an animist worldview while others arise from native Western dissatisfaction, especially within the sciences, with the limitations imposed by the ruling story. All of these alternatives challenge the story at each of its interrelated key points: (a) its hyperindividualism, (b) its hyperseparation between animal and human, and (c) its emphasis on survival achieved primarily through competition.

Collaborative creation among the Cheyenne

Paula Gunn Allen contrasts the Cheyenne creation story and its collaborative Creator with the transcendent Creator of Genesis.[11] While the story she tells arises not from her own Laguna Pueblo tradition but rather from the Cheyenne, it underscores Sahlins's point that the Jewish and Christian idea of a creator residing outside of nature makes possible the Western cultural story, which ignores the creative roles of animals and plants as well as humans. Allen's account also induced a "disorienting dilemma" when I first encountered it, causing me to glimpse my society's origin story through the eyes of one whose culture arranges itself differently by placing humans, animals and gods in friendlier relation to one another.

Allen calls attention to the first chapter of Genesis, which depicts a Creator who accomplishes everything by himself – dividing light from darkness, separating dry land from water, and creating plants and animals. He "makes everything and tells everything how it may and may not function" (P. G. Allen 1992: 57). Genesis 2, although a separate myth, continues the theme of a stand-alone Creator who places the man and woman in a perfect garden paradise where all their needs are taken care of and where, in a state of dependence, they need not cultivate their own creativity. Then the Creator forbids them to eat of one tree, leaving them an impossible choice: will they develop their intelligence or be loyal to the Creator? When they pursue their own curiosity and decision-making power, they are punished with exile from the landscape of home and from relationship with their source.

Contrast this Creator with that of the Cheyenne, who, Allen says, is "somewhat wiser" (*ibid.*: 58). Instead of trying to fashion the whole creation by himself, Maheo the All-Spirit enlists help. He first creates four things: water, light, sky-air and water people. Then Loon makes a request: "When we are tired of swimming and tired of flying, we should like a dry solid place where we could walk and rest. Give us a place to build our nests, please, Maheo." The Creator acquiesces, but with this caveat: "By myself, I have made four things ... Now I must have help if I am to create more, for my Power will only let me make four things by myself" (Marriott & Rachlin 1972: 39, quoted in P. G. Allen 1992: 57).

Unlike the God of Genesis, this Creator has restricted powers, which gives him a "sense of proportion and respect for the powers of the creatures" (P. G. Allen 1992: 57). Instead of laying down limits for them, as one might for children, he cooperates with them as equals. Together, Maheo and the water people build dry land, as Loon had requested, and together they create the human man and woman.

A collaborative creation story like this one, says Allen, leads to a worldview in which all creatures are seen as co-responsible beings, and humans must cooperate with other

earth beings in the ongoing work of creation. The human "assumes a place in creation that is dynamic, creative, and responsive" (*ibid.*: 56–7) and interacts with the animals, insects and plants of the more-than-human world, who are regarded as possessing equal, and perhaps greater, powers.

The Cheyenne story, although having unique Plains elements, emphasizes the theme of collaboration among various creatures found in the creation stories of many American Indian nations (Weaver 2006: 84).[12] Its theme of partnership and its placing animals in the forefront of the cosmological creative activity contrast sharply with the isolation and competition that characterize the state of nature in the Western story. Community precedes individual in such an account, with the community of beings helping to create their own habitat as well as their younger members, the human beings.

Sharing breath with kin: the Rarámuri

The Rarámuri of the Mexican Sierra Madre, according to anthropologist and Rarámuri native Enrique Salmón, practise conservation activities that result from their experience of kinship with other beings who share the same home. Central to their worldview is the concept of *iwí*, the binding or creative force of the universe. Like the English words *spirit* and *inspire*, *iwí* joins the notions of breath, soul, life and creativity, with the related word *iwígara*, "the total connectedness and integration of all life in the Sierra Madre", signifying that all share the same breath (Salmón 2000: 1328). Thus all beings of the natural world are kin – not, Salmón emphasizes, in a merely metaphorical way but in reality. For the Rarámuri, "the natural world, therefore, is not one of wonder but of familiarity" (*ibid.*: 1329). The family extends to some plants and animals, such as bears, coyotes, morning glory, datura and maize, who are humans in a different form. "A certain attachment results from knowing that some of your relatives are the life-forms that share your place with you" (*ibid.*).

A world where all are kin demands that humans nurture their relatives, which can mean tending and harvesting plants in ways that maintain and increase their growth. When gathering wild edibles, the Rarámuri harvest "where the *iwí* is strong", which Salmón notes tends to be places where in Western terms the plants are abundant rather than scarce. They dig onions or gather pine needles for basket weaving in ways that ensure that the source is enriched rather than depleted. Because humans are on an equal standing with other creatures in the natural world, human activities of growing and consuming food are beneficial to the environment as long as they are carried out in accord with conservation principles. The Rarámuri practices of sustainable farming stem from the "realization that the Sierra Madre is a place of nurturing, full of relatives with whom all breath is shared" (*ibid.*: 1330).

Andean community: the *Ayllu*

The themes of kinship and nurturing are found also among Andean peoples of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador and are outlined by Grimaldo Rengifo Vásquez, anthropologist and Peruvian village native. Andean life centres on the *ayllu*, the community of relatives living together in one area. The concept of *ayllu* illustrates the intimacy assumed between humans, nature beings and spirits who inhabit a given landscape and emphasizes that

conversation is needed to keep relationships – and therefore the earth – functioning smoothly.

The *ayllu* comprises the community of humans (*runas*, Quechua), the communities of deities (*huacas*), and the animals and plants of the natural world (*sallqa*). With Andean societies placing a high value on harmonious relationships, the *ayllu* strives to make decisions together in an "atmosphere of profound equivalency" among all its human and other-than-human members (Rengifo Vásquez 1998: 89). No members of the community possess greater authority than others. Relationships follow lines of kinship, so that the potatoes grown in the field are the daughters and spring water carried to the fields might be a son-in-law (*ibid.*: 91).

Relationships within the *ayllu* are reciprocal, with nurturance the medium of exchange flowing back and forth among all the kin. People might say, "Just as we nurture the alpacas, they nurture us" or "as we nurture potatoes, they nurture us" (*ibid.*: 109). Relating well with others involves giving affection as well as receiving it, and a high value is placed both on "the pleasure of giving" and on allowing oneself to be loved (*ibid.*: 107). Nurturance flowing among all is the life-giving force that regenerates Pachamama, the living earth, who is the mother of all, the source of nurturance (*ibid.*: 109). When there is sweetness among the members of the *ayllu*, the earth is healthy and life can successfully regenerate. When disharmony or deception prevails, Pachamama is injured and crops are more likely to be harmed by pests or hail.

Through ritual, conversations take place between the people and the forest, between the deities and humans, between the deities and nature. If obstacles or disharmony disrupt relationships, conversations are held among the affected parties, and each type of community – deity, human and nature – is invited to speak. Deities and nature beings might speak through divination rituals while the individual human beings speak their hearts fully. When relationships are reconciled, life can flow freely again (*ibid.*: 109–17; Jimenez Sardon 1998). Conversation – listening to the speaking of others – is the basis of reciprocity, with humans listening closely for the signs given by, for instance, clouds or llamas in order to fulfil the mutual needs and obligations for nurturing within the community. "Conversation is thus an attitude, a mode of being in unison with life, a knowing how to listen and knowing how to say things at the appropriate moment" (Rengifo Vásquez 1998: 107).

The *ayllu* does not have fixed boundaries; rather, the definition of *ayllu* changes according to context: it might be one's family (in the context of the village) or one's district (while travelling in a city) (*ibid.*: 93). An *ayllu* might extend to other-than-local territories, with families holding fields and sending nurturing activities to other locations. Thus the *ayllu* is a "family without fixed borders" that stretches between human, natural and deity worlds as well as among disparate territories.

Andean people are bringing to both national and international arenas the idea that Pachamama, a person with a proper name, has inalienable rights. In 2008 Ecuador wrote into the national constitution the rights of Pachamama, including the rights to exist and regenerate and, in cases of degradation, be restored. Bolivia took similar action in 2011. In 2010 the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth was drafted at the World People's Conference on Climate Change in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and presented for consideration at subsequent United Nations Framework Conventions on Climate Change.[13] The declaration recognizes the rights of the earth and all earth's inhabitants to clean air and water and freedom from toxic contamination, rooted in a regard for Mother Earth

as a living being, "a unique, indivisible, self-regulating community of interrelated beings that sustains, contains and reproduces all beings." Not surprisingly, the focus on a living earth results in opposition from the Andean framers of the declaration to capitalist and market-based solutions to climate change because such tactics proceed from the assumption that the earth is made up of resources to be exploited or traded, when the earth must be seen, rather, as "the source of life, nourishment and learning" (World People's Conference on Climate Change 2011).[14]

LEARNING FROM THE STORIES OF OTHERS

The three cosmologies briefly highlighted here all express a relational epistemology, where life takes place through communication among knowing subjects. They underscore the theory advanced by scholars of new animism that animist cultures are less concerned with Tylor's dualism between matter and spirit and more concerned with relationship – promoting harmony among all beings of earth, some of whom may belong to the material world, others of whom may not (Hallowell 1960; Viveiros de Castro 1998a; Bird-David 1999; G. Harvey 2006a, 2006b). Animist emphases on the close relationships between humans and other beings, such as through kinship structures or through experiencing plants or animals as other-bodied humans, challenge the hyperseparation in the Western story between humans and nature. Among these three peoples, rationality and ethics are never regarded as uniquely human properties. Community is part and parcel of the earth itself, rooted in relationships among all beings living in a place. The emphasis in the Cheyenne story on creation as a collaborative circle among closely related beings challenges the hyperindividualism of the Western story and its emphasis on survival as the product of competition. The emphasis on kinship in the Rarámuri and Andean stories blurs the Western boundaries between human and animal as well as between individual and community. In none of the stories are individual and community seen as antagonists; rather, circles of support sustain each individual being and each community. Individuals, conceptualized as individuals-in-community, exchange nourishment and sustenance with others, whether human, animal, plant, or deity. In each of these stories, community precedes individuals, constructing individuals through processes conceptualized as support and nurturance rather than discipline.[15]

How can inhabitants of a capitalist, individualist society learn from indigenous animist cosmological stories? At the most obvious level, the stories of others can be used reflexively to plant a seed of doubt in the inevitability of one's own cultural story. The cosmologies of animist peoples, especially when considered in light of thriving animist cultures, can introduce the possibility of ecological and social alternatives to a neoliberal order. A "disorienting dilemma" may ensue, which can lead to new syntheses and perhaps even a seeking out of animist models for guidance on how to live more harmoniously with one another and the natural world.

One such use of an indigenous cosmology is being developed by economist Ronald Trosper, who suggests that the indigenous cultures of northwest North America were more ecologically sustainable than modern Western cultures because the potlatch system required chiefs to redistribute their surplus income among one another and their respective houses. Such a system, if applied in the modern world, would involve economic

entities such as corporations within an ecosystem sharing their surplus income, or profits, with one another rather than assuming that profit is to accrue privately to a few. Trosper develops such a model for implementing the potlatch system in the corporate world, a model that, like the potlatch system, joins the interests of individuals and communities and would incentivize cooperative behaviours within a given ecosystem (Trosper 1998).[16]

Another line of enquiry might pursue the notions of rights arising from the Andean *ayllu* and how this notion differ from neoliberal ideas of rights rooted in the social contract theory. When individual and community are not regarded as antagonists, how do conceptualizations of rights change accordingly? What misunderstandings are likely to develop in cross-cultural political dialogues as language of rights based in a communitarian concept enters the neoliberal global arena with its assumption of rights based in isolated and competitive individuals?

A methodological question inevitably arises: can animist values, based as they are in local ontologies and small-scale, face-to-face societies, be applied outside those contexts? Or does a relational ontology require a strictly local focus? The answer to both questions is *yes*: a relational ontology emphatically requires a local focus, to preserve the face-to-face care and nurturance shared with others (human and more-than-human) in the local geography. And yet this need not prevent animist ontologies from participating in global systems of communication or exchange. Indigenous animist concepts and values, rooted in a particular place, may inspire commitments to local communities elsewhere, and they may also, as in the case of Trosper, serve as models for shifting modern economic arrangements and practices toward greater ecological sustainability. Ecuador and Bolivia, with their nationwide policies on the rights of nature, might become examples of implementing a relational ontology at the national level, and the Andean concept of the community as a "family without fixed borders" might provide a model for imagining post-capitalist global interactions as based on interacting spheres of empowered local communities rather than on the movements of global capital.

The emphasis on local communities found within indigenous animist accounts can also mitigate against the power of centralized authority, which tends to accompany a cosmology in which humans and all of nature are seen as flawed and fallen. It should not be forgotten that Augustine formulated his doctrine of original sin shortly after Christianity became the religion of the empire, for the Pelagian view – that humans are able on their own to make better moral choices – would have rendered the Church irrelevant. A universally sinful humanity needed the Church to be the conduit of grace, and declaring Pelagius a heretic was one of the earliest decisions enacted by a newly imperial Christianity. A thousand years later Hobbes, with his doctrine of the absolute sovereign, restated the need for centralized authority that arises when human beings are defined as unable on their own to create a good society. An emphasis on the local community refocuses political attention on the well-being of local individuals, whether trees, humans, rivers, or mountains, and emphasizes also the power of local communities to nurture their own members.

A CHANGING WESTERN TALE: RECOGNIZING CONTEXT AND COOPERATION

Indigenous animist peoples are not the only ones challenging the Western cosmology; alternative stories are arising also from Western sources, especially the sciences. I

mention a few examples here to show that dissatisfactions can arise internally and also to lessen the impression of monolithic power that inevitably results when the Western story is condensed into a single whole and contrasted, as a whole, with the stories of others.

The twentieth-century advances in physics, especially quantum mechanics, have been integrated quickly into technological developments but have yet to be absorbed at the level of meaning. If Newtonian physics provided the foundation for modern thought, especially neoclassical economics, then it follows that the quantum-mechanic revolution will result in dramatically modified worldviews (Mirowski 1989). Physicist Karen Barad is one of the few to spell out implications of quantum theory for both the natural and social worlds. She builds from the theories of Niels Bohr to propose an ontology in which matter "intra-acts", or mutually creates, which approaches a panpsychist cosmology and parallels animist cosmologies in which reality is an ever-shifting process carried out by mutually creating subjects (Barad 2003, 2007; Stuckey 2010).

The story of animals as competitive, need-gratifying mechanisms is also being challenged by animal scientists whose observations reveal a different story. The work of Jane Goodall is paramount here, as is that of primatologist Frans de Waal, who criticizes the "Calvinist sociobiology" underlying evolutionary theory (de Waal 1996).[17] Ethologist Marc Bekoff and his colleagues have documented rules of fair play among wolves, which erodes the idea that community and ethics are singularly human constructions (Bekoff & Pierce 2009).

In the field of genetics, the ideology of competition as the basis for both evolutionary development and developmental biology is challenged by Ken Weiss and Anne Buchanan, who show that cooperation – between proteins, between cells, between DNA molecules and proteins – inheres in the most basic processes of gene expression (Weiss & Buchanan 2009). The wall that has been assumed between genes and environment is breaking down as researchers discover the influence of social-symbolic and environmental contexts in shaping gene expression (Jablonka & Lamb 2005).

Some challenges to the modern Western natural-social story arise from encounters with Buddhism. A Buddhist ontology with its dissolving of subject and object has encouraged some neuroscientists to offer conceptualizations of the mind that emphasize intersubjectivity, where the mind becomes, not the epiphenomenon of inert biological processes, but "the activity of an essentially *situated* brain: a brain at home in its proper bodily, cultural and environmental niche" (Clark 1998). The dialogues between Buddhists and neuroscientists that have inspired such rethinking might serve as a model for dialogues between animist ontologies and a Western cosmology.[18]

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE STORY

In the dialectical relationship between culture and its origin story, people produce a story of themselves and the world, which then produces the culture – Geertz's "model of" and "model for" society (Geertz 1973: 93–4). We have looked at the Western origin story of isolated, self-serving individuals set in opposition to group discipline and how this story is mapped onto the natural world, with self-gratifying behaviour coded as "animal" while ethics and morality occupy the "social" pole. Threaded through Augustine, Hobbes, Malthus, Smith, Darwin and Durkheim, this story weaves together natural and social

sciences with economic behaviour to fashion what has appeared to be a nearly airtight story of human and environmental behaviour.

But if we are our stories, as Thomas King asserted, then the brokenness of our present world reveals a profound brokenness in the story we have been telling ourselves. The story we tell has ontological implications, and I want to risk an ontological claim: that the story of ourselves told by the modern industrial West, which is also a story about the rest of nature, is profoundly at odds with reality. In setting up fallen individuals in opposition to an order-preserving society, and in mapping that view of ourselves onto the natural world and depriving the more-than-human world of subjectivity, awareness and cooperative concern, we have made a centuries-long ontological mistake. We have not seen ourselves clearly, which means we have not seen giraffes or huckleberries clearly either. And, lacking accurate pictures of ourselves and bears and finches, rivers, scorpions, junipers, rocks and bacteria, we have pursued actions that deplete and destroy rather than sustain. Given the severity of our present ecological crisis, an ecocide that is in fact a suicide, an unraveling of the centuries-long Western story may be needed before a new fabric can be woven, a new story of our own nature told, one that is closer in alignment with reality, which is to say, nature itself.

Many indigenous cultures – perhaps most, if Sahlins is right that the West is unique in beginning its story in individual savagery – are sustained by stories that join individual and community into a whole that neither erases the individual nor sets individual well-being in tension with that of the community. If the animist cultural stories touched on here provide models of stories and cultures that are sustainable over time, they indicate that revisions to the Western story will need to centre on similarly joining interests of individual and community into a more harmonious whole. The animist cultures we touched on here accomplish this through (a) recognizing subjectivity in and kinship with the more-than-human world and (b) promoting practices of affection and nurturing as the medium of reciprocity that promotes social (and by definition ecological) stability. It is interesting that current scientific challenges to the Western story also promote models of interrelationship, co-creation and intersubjectivity. Many fruitful lines of inquiry might be pursued in comparing indigenous animisms with new developments in Western scientific stories.

But when it comes to practices of affection, Western cultures have much to learn. What will it take to reconceive the community – from organizations to governments – as nurturing rather than disciplinary bodies? As bodies that exist to promote the well-being of individual members through exchanging the coin of affection? It will require, at the start, redefining individuals as something other than self-serving (sinful) organisms, for the fallen humanity of Hobbes's vision was the prerequisite for his solution of centralized authority. Such a radical reconceiving of individual and group would have equally radical repercussions in economics, education, government and gender roles, and it is safe to say that the world could not look as it does now.[19]

And for such changes, we can hope fervently. We can also work to promote transformation toward a social order in which the flourishing of individuals in local communities stands at the centre of our perception and actions – which is to say, a post-capitalist era in which interests of the few are no longer conceptualized as opposed to the interests of the many. Those who wish to move Western society toward greater sustainability, and a more sustainable story, can begin by practising acts of radical kindness. From an animist

perspective, any behaviour that treats an other as a speaking subject rather than a manipulable object, whether in an office or a forest, enacts a more-than-mechanistic story. Any behaviour that begins from the premise of cooperation rather than competition, whether of individuals or ecosystems, challenges the inevitability of the capitalist story. Any governing body that conceives of its purpose as nurturing its members more than managing them helps to erode the long-standing enmity between individual and community. And any act that assumes a continuity of interests between the self and others will have ecological benefits, for the community that enfolds each individual includes rocks and rain, humans and microorganisms, and, contrary to what Western culture has been telling itself for four hundred or more years, we are all in this together. May we, before it is too late, listen to the speaking community, both human and more-than-human, and learn to tell a story that supports the flourishing of the world.

NOTES

1. "Modern Western culture" refers both to a worldview arising in northwest Europe during the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, a worldview dependent on body–spirit, human–nature, and subject–object dualisms, as well as the discourses and practices of industrialized countries, especially in the West and North, derived from that history (see also Plumwood 1993, 2002).
2. Though I was groping my way toward an analysis similar to that of Marshall Sahlins, discovering two of his essays greatly clarified my thinking, and I am deeply indebted to his work (Sahlins 1976b; 1996). Van Reybrouk (2001) thinks Sahlins confuses similarity between ideas with historical continuity between those ideas and believes Sahlins is arguing for a single underlying structure of ideas. But this is only one way of explaining recurring themes. An animist might talk instead about the long lives of stories.
3. I am grateful to Jeanine Canty for drawing my attention to the work of Mezirow.
4. I prefer to speak of "stories" about nature rather than "metaphors" or "root metaphors" (Pepper 1942; Bird-David 1990; Bowers 2001) to preserve an animistic awareness of the persons and subject–subject relationships present in all metaphors (see also Stuckey 2010). For example, the Nayaka of South India hold what Bird-David discusses as a root metaphor: "forest is as parent" (Bird-David 1990). But this phrase is already a story filled with active characters – forests and parents. Language of metaphor also tends to reduce a statement about "what reality is" to a materialist "what reality is like". To the Nayaka, the forest *is* a parent, not merely *like* one, and the label of metaphor bends the animistic Nayaka worldview to fit a mechanistic Western ontology.
5. My Mennonite forebears carried out a communal discipline that focused on personal morality and examination of congregants by elders; in practice, it closely resembled the type of discipline instituted by Calvin as outlined by Gorski (2003: 20–21). Mennonites, Amish, and their Anabaptist forerunners originated, of course, in Dutch and Swiss territories.
6. In his 1999 account Callicott backed away from tracing Hobbesian influence and instead credited Hume and Adam Smith, drawing a too-sharp distinction between Hume and Smith, on the one hand, and Hobbes, on the other, since Hume and Smith were working within social-contract assumptions about human nature that had been laid down by Hobbes. Worster traces the Hobbesian influence on Darwin through the geologist Charles Lyell's emphasis on the struggle for existence (1994: 143–4).
7. Though Thornton argues that he was a bit closer to Lutheranism than Calvinism (H. Thornton 2005).
8. The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* praises Hobbes as "an acute and wise commentator of political affairs" and admires him "for his hard-headedness about the realities of human conduct" (G. Williams 2005). During the administration of George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney said that Hobbes was his favourite political philosopher (Horton 2009).
9. Young details, from Darwin's letters, how Darwin regarded natural and artificial selection analogically: what the human researcher did in the laboratory was what nature accomplished through Malthusian struggle (R. M. Young 1985: 79–88). The teleological argument (that mind or purpose

resides in nature itself) thus lurks behind the idea of natural selection, and Darwin himself was aware of it. To a reader who reported that he could not consider Darwin's mechanisms without the thought occurring "that they were the effect and the expression of mind", Darwin replied, "Well, that often comes over me with overwhelming force; but at other times … it seems to go away" (*ibid.*: 112).

10. Foucault hovers just out of sight behind this discussion of power; Sahlins finds Hobbes in Foucault's assertion of an endless war of each against all and his belief in a divided self (Sahlins 1996: 407).

11. Allen was of Laguna, Sioux, Scottish and Lebanese ancestry although she identified as a Laguna woman (P. G. Allen 1992: ix).

12. Examples are found among Indians originating in the southeast, such as Muscogee Creeks (Fixico 2003: chapter 1); the northeast, such as Iroquois (Mann 2000, 1–12); other Plains groups such as Sioux (Erdoes & Ortiz 1984: 15–19); Pueblo people of the southwest, such as Hopi (Weaver 2006: 86); and people of the Northwest Coast such as Nuu-chah-nulth (formerly Nootka) (Atleo 2005: viii–ix).

13. The declaration was part of the draft language negotiated at the most recent meeting, COP 16, in Cancún, Mexico, in December 2010 but was struck from the document prior to the start of the conference.

14. Catherine Roach suggests that the use of Mother Nature imagery in patriarchal Western culture tends to reify divisions between human and nature and to reinforce the role of women as nurturers (Roach 2003). A critical question is: does Mother Nature imagery function similarly in an animist culture where nurturance is defined as the work of both women and men?

15. Social discipline also takes place, but is placed within the frame of nurturing and affection and practised through hearing each individual voice fully (Jimenez Sardon 1998).

16. I am grateful to Jared Aldern for alerting me to Trosper's work.

17. In a Calvinist sociobiology, scientists assume "selfish genes" and animal "greediness" while altruism and cooperation get disdained as sentimental or naïve. De Waal tells of primatologist Barbara Smuts, who dared to frame baboon activities in terms of "friendship" and received a cool and sceptical response: "Can animals really have friends? was the question of colleagues who without blinking accepted that animals have rivals" (de Waal 1996: 19).

18. These dialogues are initiated by the Mind and Life Institute: www.mindandlife.org/. Thanks to Sandy Hockenbury for reminding me of their work.

19. Regarding gender roles: nurturance in modern Western societies continues to be considered more women's work than men's, and the corporate world continues to pursue policies unfriendly to the nurturing of individuals and families. Making nurturance the business of the public world rather than primarily of women and families would overturn a system of gender-coded opposition between family and work.