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Bubble Clash: Identity, Environment, and Politics in a Multicultural Suburb

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Abstract

The purpose of paper is to examine whether the current feminist philosophies in the intersection of identity, politics, and the environment can have practical purchase in urban problem solving. My argument is mobilized using the story of Greater Dandenong, a multicultural suburb approximately 30km south-east of Melbourne’s central business district. This suburb witnessed what I call a “bubble clash.” In recent years, Greater Dandenong has experienced an ecological problem: its seagull population has increased, causing community conflicts over how to manage it. These conflicts have been fought between insular, closed (i.e. bubble) groups. One effect of this “bubble clash” has been that it incredibly difficult to develop communal agreement between groups with very different outlooks. Feminist theory has, historically, provided significant resources for understanding this kind of situation. In the paper, I review feminist political philosophies—drawing on Iris Young, Patricia H. Collins, and Elizabeth Grosz—that help us understand how identity and urban politics relate. My contribution is to add a pragmatic supplement to this body of work. Extending beyond the interpretation of multiculturalism in which “differences” in our identities are given an *a priori* quality, I propose a “transitionist pragmatist perspective” that (a) reframes how we understand context and contingency in the on-going formation of subjectivities and their ideals and (b) seeks to trace the history of problematic situations specifically through the lens of problem-solving.

Keywords

Identity politics, topological sense-making, feminist relational approach, multicultural suburbs, transitionist pragmatism

“Dare we imagine that recovery of other ways of being and intellectual traditions—the dreams that ‘the modern represses in order to be’—might have practical and institutional purchase, especially as we confront the planetary crisis produced by dominance of the European tradition?” (Satia, 2020: 266)

Introduction

On November 14, 2021, a small movement was brewing in Dandenong Harmony Square. “Free, free, Afghanistan”, chanted a crowd of about thirty, organised in response to the United States’ withdrawal from Afghanistan a few months earlier. The theme of the protest, however, is “glo-cal”: the listeners are not only made aware of what the US’ sudden departure from Afghanistan would mean for the immediate kin of the speakers, but also of the realities of refugees and asylum seekers in Christmas Island, in addition to the advocacy campaign for Hazaras (a minority ethnic group) in Afghanistan. The crowd is organic: the staged “official” program is almost an accessory to small groups of women, children, and families holding pickets containing each of different messages; while predominantly composed of Afghan-Australians, curious onlookers and visitors of different skin colours are also part of it all.

This is a wildly different landscape from the Dandenong of twenty years ago, when the influx of multicultural residents started shaking up the once white-dominant, working class suburb 30km south-east of Melbourne CBD. As cheap rents attract waves of migrants and refugee settlements, the City of Greater Dandenong is now one of the most religiously diverse suburbs in Australia, with 15% of residents believing in Buddhism, 12% in Islam, and 20% in Western Catholicism. This demographic shift has drastically reshaped the city both economically and culturally (Uebergang, 12 Sep 2003), creating spaces of interethnic understanding and a sense of belonging (Lobo, 2010). Greater Dandenong City Council proclaims the area to be a “city of opportunity”, linking its vision of an “inclusive city” with an aspiration for population growth to be accompanied by economic activities. Dandenong city centre is currently home to the “Afghan Precinct” and “Little India”, each comprised of small restaurants, specialty groceries and other shops selling culturally specific products. Walking around these streets, especially during the festive periods around October (e.g., Diwali), an observer may find different worlds within a world (Savransky, 2021); i.e. the

concurrent presence of plural realities, rarely communicated through the mainstream Anglophone media, flourishing and evolving with the people who animate them.

But this relatively peaceful co-existence of diverse communities reaches a climax when, due to cumulative organic processes in the ecological sphere, the uninvited “more-than-human” guests appeared on the scene. Since 2017, the city has experienced a “bird problem”—specifically, a sudden increase in the seagull population. There has been speculation as to whether this is related to the city’s multiculturalism. Some multicultural households and individuals, believing human–nonhuman co-inhabitation to be positive (for cultural or religious reasons), intentionally feed birds or dispose of food scraps in a way that is inviting to them. As one resident describes it:

Some people culturally think that feeding the birds is a good thing to do, ... in our city, it’s something that we discourage because they’re vermin, and if you feed them, they’ll come back. But people have a different perspective saying that no, no, they’re God’s creatures or they’re creatures of the universe so we should feed them.¹

On the other hand, however, it is also suspected that one of the key “sources” of bird attraction comes from several landfill sites nearby (that serve the wider Melbourne metropolitan area), rendered possible by the cheaper land value and the distance from the Melbourne CBD.

Conversing with this particular problematic situation in a multicultural suburb, the purpose of paper is to examine whether the current feminist discourses in the intersection of identity, politics, and the environment can have practical purchase in urban problem solving. In doing so, I revisit two conceptual camps widely discussed in feminist political philosophy: (1) identity politics and intersectionality, which evince a plethora of diverse group identities/knowledge programs while insisting on their equal right to flourishing; (2) a new empiricist turn in feminism, which places more emphasis on how our lived, bodily, or “topological” experiences engender new political possibilities beyond representational politics. These two camps—identity politics and the subsequent new empiricist turn—provide a useful ground where identity and urban politics can be discussed together. However, as I demonstrate through the case of Dandenong, they also exhibit limits when directly applied to a real-life situation. More precisely, the focus on the already-existing differences between plural

¹ Personal communication, September 2021.

knowledge programs can fail to stay open to the possibilities of new empirical events (that may challenge our preconceived subjectivities); on the other hand, the emphasis on how our immediate, topological experiences prompt us to think and act in new ways may undermine the *scale-jumping* aspect of narratives and storytelling that can thrive independent of our tactile sensibilities.

In recognition of their limits, I introduce a third angle, (3) a transitionist pragmatist perspective, which (a) reframes how we understand context and contingency in urban community conflict and (b) seeks to trace the history of problematic situations specifically through the lens of problem-solving.

This paper embraces Sandercock (2003) and Fincher and Iveson (2008)'s discussions on planning under multiculturalism, especially on how the urban is a generative space for encountering difference ("the other"). Under this framework, however, we tend to understand identity, thus difference, as given. My engagement with multiculturalism departs from this *a priori* conception of "difference", starting from an anti-foundationalist standpoint that we often do not fully understand how difference is manifest or what the nature of difference is (DeFilippis and Teresa, 2020). We therefore need practical and theoretical tools to negotiate the complexities arising from how "differences" are defined and lived, to help reveal and understand the challenges they pose to planning in a specific time and place.

Challenges of planning under/with multiculturalism

While the definition of "multiculturalism" can differ depending on a local political context—ranging from historical racial disparities (as the continuation of colonial legacy) to the emergence of new migration/refugee settlements (as the new global urban reality since the post-World War II), the challenges of planning under multiculturalism have largely been related to addressing socioeconomic inequities and marginalisation suffered by non-white denizens (Fincher et al., 2014). More specifically, the distributive justice issues for racially marginalised groups are paramount (e.g., housing/employment discrimination against non-white migrants; Basolo and Nguyen, 2009; Phillips, 2010). Further, scholars have argued that

the right to pursue heterogenous cultural or economic practices should be guaranteed for all migrant groups (e.g., planning for non-Western religious establishments such as mosques or assisting the actualisation of immigrant economy such as informal trading; see Gale and Naylor, 2001; Sandoval, 2010; Kim, 2015). Here, the arrival or the rise of multiculturalism—understood as the diversification of identity groups and the particular conditions that these groups are differently subjected to—is in itself seen as the source of new planning challenges.

Directing government resources and policy efforts to recognise and support multicultural groups is critical; this is especially so for local politics when migrants do not possess voting rights on arrival but their needs manifest spatially in everyday urban landscapes (Kim and Bozarth, 2020). However, in current planning scholarship on multiculturalism, the “differences” in migrant or ethnic groups’ political subjectivity is often given an *a priori* quality (DeFilippis and Teresa, 2020). This means that their political participation as well as the needs/aspirations that motivate it can be determined along the racial, religious, or cultural lines *prior to* discussing the specificities of a planning problem at hand. But if “the urban” is a space of contingent encounters (and their interactions) (Sandercock, 2003; Massey, 2005; Rose, 2005; Fincher and Iveson, 2008), can multiculturalism be seen as incidental to a planning problem?

The conceptualisation of “*a priori* differences” in social groups is often attributed to the feminist political philosophy’s claim “personal is political”—fashioned today as anyone or any group having the right to differentiated political subjectivity backed by differently lived experiences (the logic of this thesis will be examined throughout the paper). Feminist political philosophers have been for a long time theorising the plurality of the social and its implications for achieving social justice (Young, 1990; Fraser, 1998). Their interest in the meaning of “difference” in democracy, starting from gender, has had a considerable impact on reframing how “we” should be defined in public policy discourse (Roy, 2001; Fraser, 2004; Healey, 2012; Lake, 2018; Jon, 2020). This paper therefore examines the genesis and significance of their thought in thinking more generally about politics under/with difference; and applies them directly to a particular urban problem which happens to exist in a multicultural suburb—yet not necessarily hypothesized as originated from the existence of multiculturalism itself.

Identity politics and intersectionality

This section reviews the history of thought in identity politics and intersectionality, drawing on important contributions made by Iris Young and Patricia Hill Collins. Iris Young was a political philosopher whose main contribution pertained to thinking with and beyond the distributive justice model, by highlighting the importance of politics of self-determination and procedural justice. Patricia Hill Collins is a pioneer in Black feminist thought, who links the personal and the political by pointing out the plurality of collective knowledge programs—adding the epistemic justice problem to our understanding of justice. I discuss the key assumptions behind these thoughts in depth ahead of our empirical case, to nurture a transactional learning relationship between theory and practice. This is important regarding this paper’s challenge of *a priori* differences in our diverse identities and subjective ideals, since such an argument is as conceptual as it is practical.

Beginnings

Iris Young’s work has had a significant impact on the contemporary geographical thought, especially with regard to expanding the concept of justice in urban politics (Allen, 2008). *Contra* the predominant “social justice” paradigms of the 1990s, notably that of Rawls, Young went beyond distributive models of justice to argue that democratic decision-making should be the precondition for social justice. The contemporary discourse of defending welfare society is often preoccupied with distributive justice, which can lead to depoliticisation of the public sphere and decision-making being deferred to a higher authority. This is because, as long as such “equitable distribution”—of resources, power or anything else of public social value—remains the goal of politics (pre-determined irrespective of contextual dynamics), the political process of arriving at that goal becomes irrelevant. According to Young, this is problematic, since the true moments of “politics” are lived over the course of how certain policy visions or ideals are contested by different groups of people located in a specific context.

Young’s proposed solution to pursuing justice, in a context where dynamic networks of power enable evolving forms of domination, is to pursue a *repoliticisation* of “public life” that takes procedural justice seriously: “democratic decision-making procedures are a

necessary condition for social justice, both as a means to self-development and the minimisation of domination and as the best way to arrive at substantively just decisions” (1990: 212). Moreover, Young asserts: “Only a democratization of welfare corporate institutions that introduces procedures of collective discussion and decision-making about ends and means can bring people some control over their action. Democratization is less fruitfully conceived as a redistributive power than as a reorganization of decision-making rules” (ibid.: 81). This quote underlines Young’s primary concern on the contingent *processes* of arriving at justice than its projected outcome (that is extrinsic to the process).

Once qualitative processes are prioritised over quantifiable outcomes, the agonistic conflicts that arise out of group differences—often referred as the essence of the “political” in Young’s narrative—become more evident: how do these processes of democratic decision-making proceed in the face of identity and difference? Alternatively, how can we recognize and incorporate multiple group identities and perspectives in processes of democratic decision-making? This emphasis on plurality and “difference” stems from Young’s concerns regarding cultural domination and the resultant oppression of underrepresented groups’ (e.g. First Nations people) heterodox ways of life: “modern political theory and practice wrongly universalise dominant group perspectives, and that attention to and affirmation of social group differences in the polity are the best corrective to such cultural imperialism” (ibid.: 65). In other words, the modern political theorists’ positivist framework of what it means or should mean to be a “human being” or “citizen” has the potential to disregard the significance of local and customary ways of living and being (Scott, 1998). One of the key problems of welfare capitalist society is how, through experts “thinking for” citizens, it inscribes certain ways of life as “normal” (e.g. the nuclear family; participating in the asset economy via property ownership). Such top-down definitions of what is or is not a “good life” tend to problematise any deviation from the norm as imperilling society:

Domination consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Welfare capitalist society creates specifically new forms of domination. Increasingly the activities of everyday work and life come under rationalised bureaucratic control, subjecting people to the discipline of authorities and experts in many areas of life. (ibid.: 76)

However, despite Young’s emphasis (drawing on Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault) on a dynamic understanding of how power is enacted through ongoing social interactions, the

existence of “social groups” and their “differences” are often taken as *a priori* in her work—that is, they are the consequence of specific endowed identities. In her new framework of “identity politics” (Young, 2000), which appeared a decade on from the work quoted above, Young revises that identity does not arise solely from individual choices or a fixed notion of self, but from active interaction with others’ political subjectivities. Thus, identity formation is essentially the act of “conditioning” oneself to a given situation, which is often accidental and not a “choice”:

We do not choose the conditions under which we form our identities, and we have no choice but to become ourselves under the conditions that position us in determinate relation to others. We act in situation, in relation to the meanings, practices, and structural conditions and their interaction into which we are thrown. (Young, 2000: 201)

Nobody chooses the conditions they are born into, nor the life circumstances that are “thrown” at them. This theoretical turn is important, as it acknowledges the situated processes of how an individual comes to claim to be herself—which is subject to change over time. Though in her later work Young did proceed to explore the dynamic relationship between individual and social, from which “group identities” surface amid continual judicious negotiations enacted by each individual on their surroundings, I would argue that the greatest strides in this area have been best achieved by feminist geographers in subsequent years (a subject that will be returned to in the “Feminist political geography and the “empiricist turn”” section below).

Intersectionality and epistemic justice

Similar to Young, the intersectionality strand of identity politics also focused on how *external* factors and conditions help solidify the (socially perceived) differences between existing identities. As Collins (2012: 455), drawing on Cranshaw (1989; 1991), succinctly summarises:

Within intersectionality, the emphasis on the social location, multiplicity, and relationality of social locations and worldviews also has enabled the field to develop a deeper understanding of power. In essence, systems of power (such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, citizenship status, etc.) cannot be understood in isolation from one another; instead, systems of power intersect and co-produce one another to result in unequal material realities, the distinctive social experiences that characterize them, and intersecting belief systems that construct and legitimate these social arrangements.

At the same time, however, Collins is concerned with the contemporary debates on intersectionality becoming too universalized, to the point where it loses the feminists' initial commitment to "the personal is political". In other words, if everything and everyone in the position of power schematically work to oppress the less powerful, it is difficult to conceptualize who is responsible for, or has the agency in, addressing such effects of power. In responding to such a problem, Collins tries to *locate* intersectionality discourses within a specific, context-based politics, in her efforts to go beyond the *a priori* conception of identity. This progresses in two ways. First, in linking Black feminism with pragmatism, Collins is sceptical of an identity politics that focuses on the impermeable solipsism of "my" experience, calling for more rigorous attention to be paid to "collective identity" formation. Although the claim that "the personal is political" explicitly values bodily experiences and speaking from a perspective of lived reality, such "experiences" cannot exist without our shared, communicative life with others (within which we continuously re-narrate and redefine what we have experienced). As Collins puts it: "experience is existentially inclusive, continuous, unified: it is that interaction of subject and object which constitutes subject and object – as partial features of this active, yet unanalyzed totality. Experience, then, is not an 'interaction' but a 'transaction' in which the whole constitutes its interrelated aspects" (Collins, 2012: 15).²

Here, pragmatism—which traces the processes through which a "community" becomes established through sharing *symbols*—has much to offer. Relying on the flexible character of "symbols", individual agency is not sacrificed at the behest of the collective. Rather, individuals *express* their "situated creativity" through symbols (in anticipation of responses from others), with "collective identity" then forming as a result of these creativities becoming a shared, common sense. Through these ongoing transactions between the individual and the social, a group of people can develop a particular set of worldviews and knowledge programs, which in due course becomes the foundation of their "identity".

² Collins' reference to "transactional" relationship between the individual and social is heavily influenced by pragmatism, which can be read similar to my third theoretical angle, "transitionist pragmatist approach". The difference between Collins' use of pragmatism and my articulation of transitionist pragmatism is that whereas Collins considers pragmatists' work on shared symbols and knowledge programs as overlapping with intersectionality, I (in my third angle which appears below) focus on Koopman (2009)'s "third wave pragmatism" where diverse stories of transactional relationships between language and experience can be reorganised or reconstructed for the purpose of problem solving (toward a better future, i.e., for a purposeful and intentional transition from the past to future).

Second, once we recognise that the question of “identity” in intersectionality is not merely one of individuals reaffirming their “true selves”, but involves querying whether different shares of collectively lived experiences are equally valued (Collins and Blige, 2016), what comes to the forefront is the politics of knowledge-making; that is, who has the final say in defining how we know and understand the world. In prioritising *collective* experiences as the means by which new knowledge systems and technologies emerge (via symbols and interhuman communications), the key question related to realizing democratic ideals becomes one of whether these radically plural frameworks of knowledges are given an equal right to flourish. The contribution of Black feminism to recognising the heterogeneity of knowledge claims has been exhaustive. In questioning the arbitrariness of the present social order (Foucault, 1970), Black feminist thought challenged the dominant epistemological paradigm and power dynamics underlying “what counts as legitimate knowledge” (Collins, 2000). This was notably through disclosing how the unquestioned “neutrality” of certain forms of modern science and technology explicitly annuls other more subjective ways of making sense of the world. Collins’ petition for advancing identity politics in the 21st century therefore involves a return to the relational dynamics existent within the webs of plural knowledge claims (inseparable from dynamics of power), via context-based analyses of why certain epistemic claims are ignored or underrepresented.

While Collins’ efforts to “situate” intersectionality usefully highlights the collective processes of how one’s subjectivity is formed in communication with others—thereby reframing “identity politics” as “politics of knowledge-making”, it remains unaddressed whether these “socially constructed” subjectivities are sheer mental exercises (of interpreting the world, independent from objective realities). Let me explain. Empirically speaking, we come to discover and formulate “who we are” through a variety of contextually contingent events, which are often bound up with practical materialities and/or the existential conditions of being together *in a specific time and place* (e.g. physical social gatherings, concurrent interactions with everyday surroundings, spatial movements and zones of encounters). In other words, the formation of identities is not only subject to our collective interpretations (rendered possible by sharing common symbols), but also to accidental material relations that are palpably real (irrespective of our interpretations and the resulting linguistic differentiations).

This point is slightly different from intersectionality's rendering of how unequal material realities (caused by interlocking systems of power) engender *differences* in experiences and worldviews. Rather, the argument is that "being together in a specific time and place" may help to blur the linguistically differentiated contours of different identities. Lawson and Elwood (2014)'s study is useful here, as it underlines how geographical work on poverty encounters (i.e. spatial "contact zones" in which the middle class and the poor develop interhuman relationships) can "reveal moments of ambiguity, openness, understanding and collaboration" in which "boundary crossing is already happening", hence suggesting that "the potential for cross class/race alliances between middle classes and those marked as poor are indeed possible" (p. 225).

In short, identity politics philosophers help us recognise the importance of attending to multiple group identities and plural knowledge dynamics in processes of democratic decision-making—thereby pointing out the epistemic justice problem in welfare capitalism. At the same time, it downplays our everyday interactions with the physical space and new relations that it may engender, which in some cases supersede our preconceived identities or knowledge programs in terms of how we would behave or function in the world.

Feminist political geography and the "empiricist turn"

If we could understand that different chance encounters in a specific time and place can influence and shape how we understand ourselves and the world that surrounds us, everyday material conditions and spatial realities become a key ingredient in formation of our identities. The following section discusses how these concerns have been addressed through feminist geographers forming an alliance with new materiality (MacLeavy et al., 2021; Sharp, 2020). This line of thinking focuses on situated landscapes of how each individual sees, feels, and acts only in conversation with their surrounding environment. I would refer to this as "process ontology" going forward: as will be elaborated further below, it signals an empiricist turn in feminist philosophy in which our lived, bodily experiences cannot be perfectly captured by linguistic representations. This is influenced by queer feminism (stemming from Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz), because a queer body, under the currently dominant cisgender culture, questions itself on whether its phenomenological action

can perform something other than the cisgender-ness (e.g., by wearing drag)—with the possibility of changing its immediate surroundings and realities (e.g., their friends and families may be informed of the possibility of someone not falling into the given gender categories).

Such an understanding ultimately leads to “prefigurative politics”; meaning, one’s self-determination, agency, and subjectivity can birth a new reality before its being communicated to the mainstream world, and how such phenomenological performance itself can be considered a political act. Despite of it being a jargon, I adhere to this term “process ontology” for its usefulness in capturing two conceptual advancements: (1) the on-going evolution of realities, which can only be tangibly experienced in a situated instance; (2) one’s very participation in such evolution of realities, leading to the kinds of politics where topological performativity comes ahead of communication (Lury et al., 2012, Lury, 2013).

Feminist geography and “thriving otherwise”

Drawing on feminist philosophers such as Grosz (1995) and Irigaray (1993), Massey (2005) has underlined the importance of “space” as open planes of plural encounters where constellations of actors, systems, modernities and technologies manifest something that cannot be quite “knowable” behind a desk of an intellectual. This renewed emphasis on space is, according to Massey, important if we are to deflect the linear trajectory of time (“fixed story”), which is a legacy of Newtonian science and imperialist geography. As Massey puts it:

Envisioning space with depthless instantaneity deprives it of any dynamic. Envisioning space as always-already territorialised, just as much as envisioning it as purely a sphere of flows, misunderstands the ever-changing ways in which flows and territories are conditions of each other. It is the practices and relations which construct them both that demand address. (Massey, 2005: 99)

Here, “globalization” should not be understood as propagating Western “development” ideologies—something Massey refers as “aspatial globalization”—but rather regarded as “a making of space(s), an active reconfiguration and meeting-up through practices and relations of a multitude of trajectories, and it is there that lies the politics” (ibid.: 83).

Situating “spatialisation” (through which a linear projection of time is defied) has always been a part of feminist geography, which studies existentially present things, peoples, local conventions and new technologies, as well as their interactions—best described as “landscapes” of *experienced* passage of time. For instance, Katz (2004) has shown—through the perspective of children who, over the course of their lives, participate in individual/social transactional processes of making culture—that social reproduction is an ongoing practice at the intersection of “material social practices associated with the household, the state, civil society, the market, and the workplace” (p. xi). While global flows of capital create an existential stage upon which different livelihood realities are shaped, the youths who accidentally appear onstage remain protagonists of their lives, the situated unfoldings of which inform and mould the spatialisation of “the global”.

Such role played by tactile, situated materialities in a specific time and place (Lury et al., 2012, Lury, 2013) centres performativity at the heart of feminist politics. As MacLeavy et al. (2021) succinctly summarise, it is the “uptake of new materialist epistemologies”—the best example of which stems from Groszian “ontology of becoming”—that opens up the feminist political project of imagining different futures. In other words, if we focus specifically on the *dynamist universe* that Groszian philosophy projects,³ recognising the “unknowableness” of plural ontologies can lead to a reconceptualisation of “politics” as temporal imaginings of “thriving otherwise” (Nagar, 2014; Elwood, 2021).⁴ As Grosz states:

Politics, as much as life itself, is that which gives being to what did not exist ... the task of feminist politics and feminist knowledge is to give meaning to that which may become, to explore openly that which we do not yet know, to expand on that which we might come to know and on our ways of knowing. (2005: 76)

Why would feminists believe in this possibility of “what did not exist (but still can be made possible in the present)”? Because, despite knowing that female bodies currently exist in a patriarchal culture, we sustain (i.e. continue living) our everyday lives through making another present—a new reality, or virtual reality, where our bodies are not merely sites of

³ As MacLeavey et al. put it: “[n]ew materialist work importantly reminds us that matter is active, mobile and subject to constant, dynamic change” (2021: 3).

⁴ This conceptualisation recognises radically plural ways of living, thinking and acting that persist “in the face of multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence are always already writing possibilities of other worlds and relations” (Crawley 2016; McTighe and Haywood, 2018).

male domination—possible. Here is “the role of the utopian, or redemptive perspective of the ‘not yet’—or the question of, ‘How should we hope to become?’”:

Instead of focusing only on the present, which gives us women and relations between the sexes only under the order of masculine domination, we need to look more carefully at the virtuality laden within the present, its possibilities for becoming otherwise, in other words, the unactualised latencies in any situation which could be, may have been, instrumental in the generation of the new or the unforeseen. This is the very condition of feminism, or any radical politics, any politics that seeks transformation, what Cornell calls the “not yet”, or Irigaray might call “what might have been.” (Grosz, 2005: 77)

This belief (in the possibility of another reality in the present) can also extend far beyond the politics of gender. For instance, feminist engagements with ecological worlds (Moore, 2011; Grosz et al., 2017; Bignall and Braidotti, 2019) demonstrate how Groszian process ontologies (or what they often refer to as “ontology of becoming”, as in the entangled relationship between “what we know” and “what there is”) can further the debates on the politics of more-than-human ethics (Dixon et al., 2012; Allen-Collinson et al., 2018). Simply put, “gender performativity” possible in the everyday present can enlarge its imagination towards “species performativity”, in which our discussions on ethics, morality, and politics can move beyond human exceptionalism. This is related to “ontology of becoming” because it highlights how we understand “what humans really are” is inseparable from how we (humans) interact with more-than-human beings in our everyday life. Elwood (2020), drawing on the conceptualisation of “otherwise” from Black, Indigenous, Latinx and queer studies,⁵ demonstrates how a feminist relational approach to ontologies and epistemologies can help us reassemble “digital objects, praxes, logics, and representations” through contingent practices within which subversiveness is locatable only under specific socio-spatial conditions (Elwood, 2021: 2). Here, too, theoretical emphasis is placed upon the ever-evolving, existential everyday condition that is actually being lived and reinvented by someone and something, physically having the embodied agency of reinventing social space.

Generative criticisms on Groszian empiricism

⁵ This conceptualisation recognises radically plural ways of living, thinking and acting that persist “in the face of multifaceted structural, epistemological, and material violence are always already writing possibilities of other worlds and relations” (Crawley 2016; McTighe and Haywood, 2018).

The logic of Groszian prefigurative politics can be extrapolated as follows. From the perspective of a social actor acting on and reshaping their own “topology” in the everyday surroundings (Lury, 2013), the problem is not simply one of how they view, see, and know the world differently, but how the complexities and ongoingness of each of our situated topologies give birth to divergent sets of realities. Ultimately, in acknowledging our reality and being evolving within a specific context and physical body, we also recognise that the reality and being of others are to a degree unknowable—subjectivity must begin somewhere and one’s body cannot be located everywhere. “The given surroundings”, in the end, have realistic boundaries in the act of individuals formulating a shared sense-making with others; admitting this, however, involves living with the fact that the realities of communities “elsewhere” may be beyond the grasp of an individual’s situated body “here, right now”, precisely because it is impossible for an individual to trace the ongoing nature of new social/topological interactions and movements that others are making with whom, with what, where, and how—which is, in this very second, constantly updating and reshaping their realities.

Examining the role played by process ontologies in progressive politics prompts a number of generative criticisms. Wright and Tofa (2021) point out that empiricist sense-making is not automatically progressive—rather, the politics of indigenous sovereignty demands that greater attention be paid to how “the real” is currently represented via geohistorical positionalities. In other words, simply “being emotionally affected” by the continuing physical presence of indigenous bodies does not guarantee the generation of political actions that, to a certain extent, should be fulfilled in a mainstream language (e.g., position statements or manifestos written in English, for them to infiltrate the existing policies and regulations). Relatedly, Rose (2020) points out that “affect” does not automatically lead to “caring”:

While it may be the case that witnessing our relational connectivity engenders an inclination to care for the relations that constitute us, there is nothing imminent to the relations themselves that explains this instigation. ... how does a body—as a relational composite—transcend the relations that constitute it in order to witness itself as a subject, that is, as a body that does not simply exist but can potentially care? (Rose, 2020: 965)

Here, we come full circle. While Young’s prescient proposal—that identity-making is a collective practice of conditioning oneself to a given situation—has been much expounded by feminist geography studies of the situated evolution (i.e. the “geo” side) of political

subjectivity, the Groszian emphasis on intense “dynamism” of sense-making (and the resulting different topological movements and realities yet to be captured by language) undermines the role of linguistic representations in transgressing temporal and geographical scales. For instance, denying any form of representation risks dismissing the collective experiences of subordination faced by mainstream social categories (e.g. race, gender) regardless of where in the world an individual lives (Kinkaid, 2019). How and why someone cares or comes to care about something is a complex process requiring not only of immediate “affect” but also imagination, storytelling, and creative intersubjectivity that can travel across time and space (Lake, 2019).

Transitionist pragmatism perspective

The vitalist emphasis of process ontologies conceptualises the dynamism and ongoingness of everyday topology-making as having considerable impact, to the point where rapidly evolving realities of diverse relations are perceived to exist outside of systematised discourse. This dimension of the dynamical universe (i.e., rapidly shifting realities that surround us) possesses an emancipatory power—recognising situated ontologies as launchpads for prefigurative politics means recognising another world is currently being written by those performing at the interstices of everyday life, startling the predominant system through unprecedented spatial interventions (see Hartman, 2019). However, while acknowledging the critical role played by the performative reconfiguration of realities, it should be noted that any insistence on “my reality” presupposes an artificial dualism between the givenness of the real (particularity of individual experiences) and interpreted versions of the real (experiences collectively acknowledged via shared vocabularies).

One of the generative ways of moving past the dichotomies of language vs. experience, or mainstream representations vs. subjectively embodied ideals, is using a transitionist pragmatism angle that focuses on the interactions between representations (discourses), topologies (spatial materialities), and virtualities (ideals) in the anticipation of a better future. Here, I introduce two key themes of transitionist pragmatism: (1) the on-going formation of “the ideal” (2) problem solving via reconstruction.

“The ideal” ... in the making

Under the framework of Groszian process ontologies, the source of “what’s ideal” is subjectively determined by the experiencing subject(s). From a pragmatist perspective, however, “what’s ideal” emerges out of different subjects’ contingent encounters with material affordances, cultural/historical milieus, and institutional contexts in a specific time and place. The distinction between the former and the latter is that, while the Groszian version of the ideal (that she refers to as “virtuality”) already begins with the consciousness of an individual self (e.g., a queer body), the pragmatist’s version of the ideal is something to be achieved through the *interactions* between different subjectivities—which means, it begins with the diverse events of transactional encounters (and not with a distinctive consciousness of oneself already defined prior to its interaction with others).

Learning from Deweyan interpretation of “experience” that goes beyond its possessive/exclusive relationship with the experiencing subject⁶, Heinich (2020) attempts to overcome the psychological interpretation of value by adding more contextual variables to heterodox practices of valuation (c.f. Simmel, 1978). Experience and value are inseparable from a pragmatist’s perspective which sees morals or normative guidance for action/evaluation as an emergent and continually evolving product of everyday practices (in actually existing social milieus). This has several implications on how we think about the formation of “the ideal”. For instance, the process of deciding what’s ideal or considered valuable demands more than subjective or intersubjective idealism; for a value system to be operationalised, it needs not only persons (who would perform/embody the value software) but also their transactional relationship with physical constraints of things, social bounds, and institutional settings. With “constraints of things”, we accept the physical reality tied to material affordances—dispensing with “the idealistic belief in an infinite lability of the world we live in” (p. 81). With “social bounds”, we recognise the social, political, and cultural milieu in which “the regimes of value” emerge (Appadurai, 1988). Here, “the formation of

⁶ Dewey (1925)’s concept “experience” is a lot more complex than a mere “first-hand experience”; when left alone, experience is just “what it is”—“not all thoughts and emotions are owned either socially or personally” (p. 234). “Experience” is not a direct outcome of a subject bodily living through primary experience (feeling the sunshine, walking on the flat earth, etc); the constitution of experience has a transactional relationship with cultural assemblages (of a specific time and place), such as (1) social conditions comprising of “current beliefs in morals, religions, and politics”; (2) tradition, education, and customs “habituated through the weight of authority, by imitation, prestige, instruction, the unconscious effect of language” (p. 14). The evolution of language and experience are transactional; experiences can inspire new language and existing language can condition raw experiences through mediation.

value no longer resides in work or utility, but in the desire generated by an object according to the beings and to the situation it meets... its value essentially comes out of ‘biography of objects,’ the ‘social life of things’” (Heinich, 2020: 80, from Appadurai, 1988). With “institutional settings”, we engage with institutional structures (e.g., actors/agencies operationalising public policy, governance models) that prefer the stabilisation of certain ideals in a given moment in time. In a pragmatic redefinition of valuation, “value” has a wider operating terrain than that of a specific set of social norms; often invisible and implicit, they become explicit and real in the moments “controversies, of normative tensions, of conflicts” (ibid.: 83).

If Heinich (2020) highlights the “socially growing” side of subjective or intersubjective ideals, Koopman (2013) emphasises the historical contingency of shifting value paradigms. Koopman (ibid.: 239-247) specifies “transitionality” as an angle that focuses on the dynamic processes of how our social values continue evolve in interaction with actual situations (e.g., consider, for instance, how reiterations of applied value-arguments become “law” through actual court cases and attorneys contextualising the storylines of their defendants). What’s important here is that discursive logics (validating certain ethical claims) do not remain on their own, but they are always in conversation with problematic situations overflowing with practical materialities (e.g., forensics). As Koopman puts it: “our normative conceptions, beliefs, and actions must be indexed to the historical situations in which they arise and the temporal flow in which they do the work that they perform for us” (ibid.: 244). By pointing out the contingency of these material assemblages—that aid or hamper the (temporary) stabilisation of particular value claims, a transitionist is committed to the indeterminacy of the future (see Lake, 2020).

Reconstructing the present toward a better future

We have now learned that “the ideal”, either that of an individual or of collectives, surfaces through the experiencing subjects’ transactional relationship with practical constraints, cultural milieu, and institutional setups compositing the stage of valuation; in that process, contingent materialities and actually existing situations may inform and shape the progression of different value claims. But how should one think about mobilising these in the anticipation of a better future? While ideals can be radically plural and continually evolving at each of their own rate, “physical togetherness”—a distinctively *urban* problem—necessitates a

collectively envisaged passage of time. As ideals try to occupy their mental, physical, or institutional space in a society with the intention to stay, “future” becomes a battle ground for contested politics of value-actualisation.

By placing temporality and historicity at the heart of pragmatist thought, Koopman (2009; 2013) turns to the pragmatists’ method of navigating social change: *reconstruction*. Pragmatists reject the dichotomy between epistemology versus axiology, because they believe that our path toward a better future lies not upon discovering the extrinsic truth quietly waiting to be unveiled, but upon learning to redesign, rearrange, and reconstruct currently existing resources for the betterment of our lives. Knowledge is sought not for the sake of knowledge itself, but for the benefit of solving the problematic situations that are constantly on the move and emerging. Our reality should not be passively documented from afar but reassembled and communicated in a way that could call for an actionable agenda. To do such work, however, a *critical* inquiry into what has caused or generated this problematic situation to occur is imperative. It is worth quoting Koopman at length here, since he successfully clarifies what’s original about Deweyan approach to problem-solving *via* reconstruction:

Reconstruction is not mere problem solving just insofar as the solutions that emerge in response to the problem are not made immediately available by the problematic situation itself. In a reconstruction there emerges a distinct solutional element not analytically decomposable into the elements made available by the original problem situation. Second, while solutions are seemingly situated on the same level as their problems, reconstructions should be seen as second-order (or, better, critical) interventions into *the conditions of possibility constitutive of a problematic situation*. With these important qualifications, it is helpful to think of reconstruction as working with the materials found within a problematic situation and transforming their conditions toward their resolution into a secure situation. (Koopman 2009: 188, emphasis added)

While pragmatists believe that we already have all we need (e.g., materials, ideals, resources, human energies) to solve the problem at hand, the work of *re-weaving* the present conditions of possibility (beyond simply singling out the elements) requires a historicist sensibility. Here, Koopman (2009; 2013) links Foucaultian genealogy with Deweyan pragmatism. Genealogy, a critically rigorous method of demonstrating when and how something becomes “problematic” in a specific time and place, is effective in revealing the expansive connectivity of things over time; pragmatism, on the other hand, occupies itself with problem-solving or response-giving aimed at enhancing the present situation. The

former is retrospective and critical, while the latter is forward-looking and constructive. Foucault was concerned with the problematic relationship between power, knowledge, and freedom, and used genealogy to disclose how the tangible materiality of past practices (e.g., techniques of discipline, exclusion, surveillance, standardizing sexuality, purification of “reason” against madness) are now conditioning our modern experience (Koopman, 2009). While Dewey was also interested in the history of philosophy, political economy, and freedom and used historicist problematisation to demonstrate how the philosophies of yesterday have yet to catch up with the socioeconomic condition of our time, Dewey was more devoted to developing a practically engaging, melioristic critique, particularly notable in his theorisation of education and local politics as the pinnacle of democratic experience (Lake, 2017).

These two different thinkers’ rather disparate temporal orientations (looking back vs. looking forward) can be reconciled if a critical inquiry aspires to do both: to reassemble or reconstruct the storylines of a particular problematic situation *specifically from* the perspective of ameliorating the present. As Koopman (2013: 247) details:

Genealogy agitates and pragmatism meliorates. I envision their dual deployment as follows: genealogical problematisation is used to specify the details of a problematic situation in which we find ourselves; pragmatic reconstruction is then used to clarify and augment the practical responses to this problematic situation that are already being elaborated in practice. This can be developed as a reciprocal process such that the two forms of critical inquiry inform one another in mutually enriching fashion.

In summary, transitionist pragmatism perspective offers a useful way out of the conceptual tensions between identity politics and Groszian prefigurative politics; e.g., an extensive focus on existing identities and knowledge programs may neglect the emerging possibilities of “space” and chance encounters that reshuffle political positionalities in new and unexpected ways; an empiricist glorification of subjectively embodied ideals, on the other hand, may end up becoming parochial due to its disregard of the role of imaginative narratives and storytelling that jump across time and space. By highlighting on-going formation of “the ideal” through our actual practices of them (in conversation with the social and material contexts that we find ourselves in), as well as noting how our “knowledge” about something cannot be separated from our collective pursuit towards “what’s to be done”, transitionist pragmatism overcomes the dichotomies between the power of linguistic representation versus the performative possibilities of material worlds—effectively proposing

context-based ways of marrying temporal flow and human intention. The benefits of this approach become more evident once applied in practice, as we will see below.

Bubble Clash: Identity, Environment, and Politics in a Multicultural Suburb

Now, let us return to our case of Dandenong and see how the aforementioned conceptual angles—(1) identity politics and intersectionality, (2) process ontologies and prefigurative politics, (3) transitionist pragmatism—can be useful for understanding our problematic situation in the intersection of identity, environment, and politics.

In response to the sudden increase of seagulls, the property owners in Dandenong complain that the seagulls' droppings are damaging property values and causing economic harm, leading some city councillors—invoking the city's slogan (“city of opportunity”)—to problematise new bird settlements as a “threat” to the city's economic life. As one councillor puts it:

Many businesses are complaining about the seagulls. This is creating a big problem for them because they are spending tens of thousands of dollars on trying to secure their roofs and box gutters. Is there anything else we can do from Council's point of view to try and get rid of these seagulls once and for all? ... I am a little bit upset that these businesses are losing tens of thousands of dollars through repairing their roofs during COVID so we need to take this to the next level. I think we need to write to the Minister and let her or him know of our problem and maybe we can have a one-off clean up and move these nests properly, but we need to do something because what has been done is not working so can we write to the Minister?⁷

Councillors have demanded concerted action to educate citizens on “better” habits (e.g. not feeding birds, disposing of food waste in accordance with city guidelines), with one city official going as far as saying, “If you notice anyone feeding the birds you should report this activity to council immediately” (Delibasic, 23 Jan 2020). Meanwhile, an environmental conservationist has argued that accommodating gulls in this location draws them away from their traditional habitats (e.g. Mud Islands in the Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park), and that the situation is being caused by a modern culture of waste (Brown, 11 Aug 2017). In fact, it has been also argued that a key “source” attracting the gulls is the waste treatment facilities in nearby areas. Dandenong South has various EPA (Environment Protection Act)

⁷ City Councillor at the City Council Meeting on 12 July 2021.

licensed points (Section 20 of the Act requires the occupier to obtain a license to discharge, handle, treat or dispose of waste to the environment): it currently hosts three landfills, four organic waste processing/composting sites, twelve prescribed industrial waste management sites, and one abattoir.⁸

From this point on, I discuss this case by relaying it with the three theoretical angles that I have expended on in the previous section. I demonstrate how three different stories can be narrated depending on the choice of a conceptual paradigm, introducing the richer insights made visible by employing each successive approach.

The case of Dandenong seen through identity politics

Viewed from the perspective of identity politics, the situation in Dandenong is essentially about competition between distinctively plural cultural narratives. Here, several identity claims can be observed, each following a particular program that prescribes how one would react to a given situation. For those who identify themselves as followers of certain cultural/religious practices, the proliferation of nonhuman life is not something to be problematised against human life. For city councillors, who consider “economic opportunities” to be the pillar of the city’s identity, anything that contravenes economic activity or property values is regarded as being a “public enemy”. And for those whose identity comes more broadly from being a human who is part of “modern consumption culture”, the fundamental problem lies in humans interrupting “nature”. What is particularly noticeable, through the lens of identity politics, is the overrepresentation of economism (“property value” arguments and the resulting vilification of seagulls) in public decision-making processes. In current newspaper discourses and city council meeting discussions (2017–2021), the proposed “solutions” mainly include culling birds (accompanied by narratives such as the “dirty flockers are back”)⁹ and educating residents about appropriate waste management practices.

⁸ EPA data available at: <https://mapshare.vic.gov.au/victoriaunearthed/>.

⁹ Dandenong Star Journal Local News, 26 July 2019. <https://dandenong.starcommunity.com.au/news/2018-07-26/dirty-flockers-are-back/>

However, regarding identity politics' claim that identity-making is "conditioning" oneself to a given situation, it is unclear whether the "given situation" in this case is constituted purely of people's differentiated socioeconomic cultural standings and the material conditions dividing them (to enable, in Young's words, "politics of difference"), or whether it also includes topological common-sense experiences shared not just by particular social groups, but by all groups residing in a specific time and place. For instance, multicultural residents expressed a wide spectrum of views on seagull population. Some of the responses include, when asked whether they perceive increasing seagull population as a problem or not (from the affirmative to the dissenting):

"It's a big problem, they're nesting in the gutter and causing all sorts of troubles in roof maintenance. ... I'm not sure we can kill them though, aren't protected species?"

"It could be a problem, for those who own buildings here. I don't own this property, so [there's] no direct harm but I do notice them. I've never in my life seen so many seagulls in a city before. I can't go outside and have a coffee break in the back [alley] because I know they will come when I'm eating. ... But I don't think we should kill them. We should consult with agriculturalists to get some tips about how to move their habitat to elsewhere."

"It can be a problem but we shouldn't kill them. We should rather see this as a problem for the birds' own sake. People here sometimes give food that contains lots of spices, and that could be bad for birds' metabolism. Also, they can become lazy and that's not good for their health either."

"No. I feel sorry for them when they ask for food. So I share it [with them]."

"I don't think they're a problem at all. I had no idea [that] the city council was meditating on culling them. That's inhumane. How could they do that without talking to us?"¹⁰

If we apply Collins' formula (of collective experience leading to a knowledge programme via shared symbols) to planning under multiculturalism, the critical question remains of *which* symbols different cultural groups would choose to transduce their experience into a collective reality, given that different symbols serve different scales of political subjectivity. For instance, if we assume that "English" is a shared symbol in Dandenong, residents may start framing their experiences through the "city of opportunity" narrative that regards seagulls as an enemy of the city's built environment—after all, to a certain extent, use of the English language in Australia carries a legacy of imperialist capitalism. On the other hand, if we assume that each resident will regardless navigate their

¹⁰ Author's personal communication with residents, 2021.

experiences via their own epistemic perspective (e.g. choosing their own language and/or knowledge set *over* English), their interaction with the seagulls will likely be informed by caring for nonhuman life in an everyday setting. Thus, people can have different scales of responsibility and care even while undergoing a common experience, depending on which symbols an individual makes use of in framing their experiences. In this scenario, identity bubbles remain intact—under identity politics, it is assumed that “worldly experience” (noticing the gull population increase as a phenomenological event) cannot trump the cultural narratives each community subscribes to.

The case of Dandenong seen through Groszian empiricism

From the perspective of Groszian empiricism, the story of Dandenong is about how diverse topological sense-makings generate different reality bubbles—manifesting physical embodiments of subjective ideals enclosed within each of those bubbles. What separates these bubbles, in essence, is different conceptualisations of temporality. For residents of specific cultural practices, or those who “feel sorry” for the gulls, a brief moment of direct human/nonhuman encounter is something to be valued. As Grosz (1995) notes, drawing on Einstein’s theory of relativity, time should be understood as being relative to the topological ongoingness of space, in which different interaction events across objects create new dimensions of the real: “[t]hrough this development of non-Euclidean geometries and post-Newtonian physics, not only does our everyday understanding of space and time change, but a proliferation of different models of space-time, different kinds of space (and time) with different properties circulate” (p. 96). Consequently,

Mathematical and scientific formulations of space-time become *localized*, relevant to the operations of specific types of object (subatomic particles, molecules, objects, etc) and of specific properties (dimensionality rather than shape, space rather than lines, orientations rather than enclosed spaces). This *rich pluralism* of representations is not necessarily aligned to the primacy of the visual (as in Euclidean geometry), nor to the perception of matter, but enables a multiplicity of (sometimes) incommensurable models of space and time to be explored (Grosz, 1995: 96, emphasis added).

All of which is to say that plural ontologies of values exist depending on the *interactions* that occur in space, with each interactive relation representing different dimensions of time—space—a perspective that is ungraspable according to the Newtonian conceptualisation of

time as something that exists independently of space.¹¹ For instance, in the case of the city councillors, their seagull-vilifying claims are based on a conceptualisation of time dictated by the time of depreciation of property assets. While, by lengthening the physical life of buildings, it could be said that future social interactions are being secured, who is really to say that relationship-building with birds—however ephemeral and mundane it may seem—is any less valuable than a building’s lifespan? This is especially so given that economism, the interests of property owners, and ‘economic man’ ideologies are overrepresented in today’s Western capitalist societies (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015; Simone, 2019).

Further, consider the timeline of environmental conservationists, who speak of how seagulls and other nonhuman forms of life were here first, or that species diversity is essential to the continuing life of the planet. Seagulls are protected species in the State of Victoria (to which Dandenong/Melbourne belongs), meaning that to cull them, a special permit must be issued on each occasion. The following remark was made by a city official in response to a councillor’s railing against birds:

The seagulls are a protected species, one may not disturb their nests, one may not remove their nest, one may not take any action to physically eradicate them. ... Seagulls are attracted to food and we have had our Local Laws Officers go out and try to educate members within the community against putting food out for the birds. We have seen and some of the Councillors here have also raised it with me, it may have been XXXX who attended an event at one of the parks in Noble Park and saw a lady who goes out and she thinks she is doing a good deed by feeding the seagulls. ... As I say, they are not a pest, they are not feral, they are a protected species and the only way you are going to stop them roosting in gutter boxes is if people secure their own roofs.¹²

Once we understand time as being *relative to* the topological spatial experiences that different human groups claim to be valuable, deciding which representation of time best serves the city and its residents becomes a difficult question—as it has to take account of the simultaneous evolution of plural interactive relations (e.g. human–nonhuman encounters; bird–building encounters; birds’ historical migratory patterns disrupted by landfills).

¹¹ Dewey (1929), in *The Quest for Certainty*, also notes that: “For conclusion of Einstein, in eliminating absolute space, time and motion as physical existences, does away with the doctrine that statements of space, time, and motion as they appear in physics concern inherent properties” (p. 117); thus, it “signified that local or individualized times are not the same as a generic common time of physics: in short, it signified that physical time designates a *relation* of events, not the inherent property of objects” (p. 116, emphasis in the original).

¹² City Planner at the City Council Meeting on 12 July 2021.

From the perspective of Groszian process ontologies, this question of value embedded within temporality points to a “virtuality of the present” (i.e. what is considered “ideal” in a specific time and place) that cannot be separated from situated topologies of sense-making. In the eyes of an environmental conservationist who has observed the migratory pattern of birds over time, the interference caused by human settlements—including environmental impacts aggravated by the growth of the region’s mainstream economy—is far from ideal. The virtuality they project (i.e. minimising the environmental impacts of our everyday urban living) cannot be independent of what is topologically happening in terms of human waste disposal interrupting the seagulls’ “original” travel patterns. On the other hand, in the eyes of those with a non-Western epistemology, “the ideal” may exist in the moment of co-inhabiting with all God’s creatures, as practised in their everyday bodily interactions with the topological environment. From this perspective, one could argue that the human exceptionalism birthed by modernity is the “situation to repair”, a process that that can commence through caring for the nonhuman creatures we encounter in the here and now. Hence, even among those who inhabit bubbles of topological sense-making that *depart from* mainstream economism, virtualities diverge and remain incommensurable.

The case of Dandenong seen through transitionist pragmatism

From the perspective of transitionist pragmatism, however, discursive representations, topological experiences, and subjective/intersubjective ideals have on-going, transactional relationships with one another, which only materialise themselves in a specific time and place. Subsequently, Heinich (2020) may propose to process ontology thinkers that subjective ideals cannot be separated from cultural influences, political contexts, and material constraints. For instance, what process ontologies fail to capture in the case of Dandenong is how the cultural dominance of economism (e.g. the “property values” argument against the lives of birds) plays a critical role in marginalising alternative value ontologies. Though one may be able to recognise how everyday topologies can foster new virtualities, the existing hierarchies among them—i.e. who in Dandenong (where its “official” language is English) acts on the power to mainstream certain values using discourse fabrication—are unclear in Groszian frameworks. A transitionist pragmatist approach avoids this shortcoming by attending to the “linguistic medium” that not only penetrate different reality bubbles but also *condition* the experience and mood of a society (via culture, policy, regulations).

Further, the rationalities and discourses undergirding local politics are inevitably linked with the physical surrounds in which they are exercised. Socialities functioning under alternative value softwares (other than the ‘Economic Man’ programming), through their daily participation in waste, may at some point be subject to the influences of the city’s discourses on ecosystem constraints. The mainstream culture or worldview, in return, may need to recognise the wider, intergenerational political implications of “bubble clash”: what’s at stake here is not simply that ideals (and the subjects who “have” them) are pitted against one another, but the exchanges and trade-offs between value programs that will have enduring impacts on the future environmental landscapes of Dandenong. The society must ask itself: what other value assemblages and their messages are we sacrificing when we continue to uphold the property-rentability regimes of value?

Koopman (2013) on the other hand can propose to Collinsian knowledge program advocates that discursive logics and epistemic claims evolve with the contingency of materialities that we sometimes accidentally find ourselves in; “our norms must be continually reapplied and reinterpreted in the situations in which they function” (Koopman, 2013: 263). The point of “contingency” here is not merely that there are plural knowledge programs springing up out of random experiences, but that discourses themselves grow in interaction with problematic situations. In everyday social settings, discourses often find the need to extend their logics in order to explicate and envelop new happenstances, especially when in competition with other discourses (e.g., courtroom situations where prosecutors and defenders expand their storylines of justice in interaction/competition with one another). Consider, for instance, a scenario in which environmental activists (who are concerned about the birds’ migratory patterns) decide to work with the community and they together develop new narratives on the relationship between birds’ health and the larger scale ecosystem dynamics in Dandenong. Residents, in their everyday life setting, may not fully “sense” the movement and circulation of things at a wider scale, but they can imagine it and reflect that in practice if effective articulations are in force. Compared to the city’s current solution to either kill the “excess” seagulls or install electronic devices (lighting fixtures, artificial predator noises) to disorient the birds’ senses, recognising and working with diverse stakeholders and their ideals seems to be a better option.

But what Koopman (2009, 2013) uniquely offers is reassembling the history of the problematic situation through the lens of ameliorating the present. Tracing the history of

“seagull phenomenon” enlarges our geographical horizon beyond the “local” in terms of actors, logics, events, and their networked interrelationships that have allowed (or taken part in) this problem to surface. Through history, we learn that spatial connections are much more expansive than immediate materialities. Recall that Dandenong area is handling a lot of landfill waste coming from other regions, which was one of the reasons why seagulls are taking roots in this area. The nearby suburbs Clayton South and Springvale South (in the southwest of Dandenong) were previously home to several landfill sites (that serve wider Melbourne metropolitan area), which breached the landfill gas limit and closed in 2016; Clayton had similar issues of rising seagull population and birds’ droppings affecting the city’s rental market (Estrop, 4 Feb 2016). With this pattern of seagulls following waste management sites and the locations nearby, the problem seems to be of a regional one—and may require intercity conversations and solutions. Indeed, the critical question for the region remains as to whether Dandenong and its adjacent areas are, due to their cheaper land value, have been historically overburdened by waste from more affluent localities closer to Melbourne CBD.

Here, the institutional context of planning becomes important. In the State of Victoria, where Dandenong belongs to as a municipal government, the State Government has the final say in land use decisions. The Dandenong City has had a complex relationship with its industrial land use. On the one hand, the industrial land use designation attracts economic development projects to the area. Traditionally a working-class suburb, Dandenong’s employment profile is dependent on manufacturing industries (23.1%), many of which are located in the South.¹³ On the other hand, it is one of the reasons why waste management facilities have called the city their home since 1976 (when the industrial land use zoning was first introduced to Dandenong). Through the controversies such as the Lyndhurst toxic waste dump giving rise to “Residents Against Toxic Waste in the South East (RATWISE)” (Caldwell, 13 May 2010), the city has been asking the State government to change its heavy industrial land use zoning (Zone 2) to a lighter one (Zone 1)—but the State government has so far refused it (Lucadou-Wells, 24 July 2020; 28 July 2020). This situation can be framed as a classic case of environmental justice, where the communities with lack of political or financial resources often end up with “unwanted land use” and are forced to navigate “a politically acceptable balance between the countervailing pressures of capital and

¹³ Source: REMPLAN.

community” (Lake, 1993: 91). In the meantime, within the city of Dandenong, multiculturalism is being problematised against the bird population increase, with heterodox cultures and ways of being-in-the-world being relegated as “irrational” behavioural routines subject to corrective control.

It seems probable that the solution for this version of “bubble clash”—where a regional scale environmental justice problem meets a more localised epistemic justice problem—may lie in reconfiguring the governance structure in a way that gives localities more autonomy and power to self-determine their social futures. Currently, the “future visions” for Dandenong are mostly drawn by the State government, with the State-led initiatives such as “Plan Melbourne” (defined as “the Victorian Government’s long term vision for metropolitan Melbourne”) and “Revitalising Central Dandenong Initiative” (recommending the area as one of the “designated geographic concentrations of interconnected businesses and institutions that make a major contribution to the national economy and Melbourne’s position as a global city”).¹⁴ Plans such as these place onus on the city in fulfilling certain development patterns deemed appropriate by the State, but not necessarily by the residents who will live with the local consequences of these decisions. Given that such “city shaping” discourses are only being made in English, it is highly unlikely that these visions (proposed by the State) reflect those of multicultural communities; 64% of the residents in Dandenong are foreign born, with 19% of its population having limited fluency in the use of spoken English (over three times the metropolitan level of 6%).¹⁵ As Lake (1993) noted, an environmental justice problem, in essence, expresses a conflict between community interests and the needs of capital (e.g., waste management facilities “rightly needed” in the service of metropolitan growth), “which is constrained in its intervention by the capital-state relationship” (p. 88). Subsequently, democratic equality and procedural justice will be severed if the community is not empowered to control its environment (Lake, 1996), especially regarding its having no say in the production of environmental problems or the institutional structure that hinders its active participation in capital investment decisions.

¹⁴ Revitalising Central Dandenong.
https://www.development.vic.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0008/64358/Macropplan-market-report.pdf

¹⁵ Source: The City of Dandenong.

In the meantime, through mobilisation of local politics, the city itself *can* reject external development proposals that do not reflect the community desires and needs. The possibility of such countermovement is currently being evinced in the Council’s contested reception towards the waste-to-energy plant proposal in Ordish Road (Lucadou-Wells, 28 Feb 2022; 14 March 2022; 20 March 2022). In retaining such regulatory will, however, the city should pay more attention to the growing cultural and social life of the city and its relationship with “economy”; the arrival of multicultural residents *should not* be simply seen as “population growth” furnishing human labour to the existing modernised economy, but rather be seen as opportunities to reimagine the city’s future through renewing its value ontologies accompanied by plural socialities.



Figure 1. Seagulls in Dandenong on a sunny day. © Author

Conclusions

From the snapshot of “seagull phenomenon” faced by a multicultural suburb, multiple storylines can be drawn. Is this a story about the growing pains of modernisation and migrant

integration, a problem to be “fixed” through expert-led education and management? Is it one of underrepresented identities and heterodox ways of life suffering procedural oppression in a context where the English language dominates the public sphere? Or is it a hidden tale of environmental justice situated in a complex relational transaction between dominant representations and evolving materialities, where the underrepresented ended up with the landfills that attracted the seagulls in the first place, only to be wrongly accused of causing the problem due to their epistemological distance from English? And what about species justice for seagulls, whose sense of orientation was sent out of kilter by the environmental impacts of human waste disposal, and are now at risk of being culled for “being in the wrong place”?

In terms of identity politics, the question of representation and language is important, as it addresses the unequal power relations that mainstream mediums embody and reify. To claim the “personal is political” is not to assert that the particularities of “my” condition are a given, but to remind us that the individual and the social are intertwined through discursive practices and knowledge programs. Identity politics’ social constructivism focuses on the historical processes underlying the dynamics that mediate “the real”—here, “matter” and “lived experience” only become “true” via shared symbols and narratives accumulated over time. This offers a somewhat unsatisfying explanation in the case of Dandenong, since the phenomenological side of “matter” (waste management practices, the increase in the seagull population) is instigating sudden and unexpected interactions between different identity groups.

As for Groszian process ontologies, a belief in the “virtuality of the present” is critical, as it allows for the possibility of subversiveness and defiance (to the mainstream) in the everyday. To focus on the “topological” (i.e. phenomenological) difference one can make via everyday movement and action is, in essence, to highlight the existence of (new) ideals already impregnated with the real—i.e. “change” has already begun through our act of reinventing the situated realities to hand. However, one could question whether these practices of sense-making are, to an extent, themselves subject to the different storylines that groups follow—and therefore subject to change. What is missing from the above picture of differentiated sense-making is the intertwined nature of language and experience (Koopman, 2009), where a person’s social life may involve multiple motivations for action (i.e. “caring”

that leads to material participation) depending on which scale-jumping narratives and rationalities one chooses to adopt (Lake, 2019).

A transitionist critique, through reassembling our present moment at the confluence of historicity and contingencies, allows spatial phenomena to be interpreted as complex sites incorporating a diversity of contested representations, topology-makings, and aspirations. Through interpreting “the ideal” as an on-going valuation project where plural aspirations negotiate their positions in interaction with cultural milieu, material affordances, and institutional contexts, one can note that subjectivity, highly regarded in feminist politics and multiculturalism, has to locate/land itself in the social (Lake, 2021). Discourses representing intersubjectivity are not sheer human invention, but continually expanding storylines (or, “heuristic re-compositions” à la Koopman) shaped and affected by the practical materialities present in the everyday. Topological sense-making is not a collection of independent bubbles of subjective experiences, but a socially and politically grounded affair conditioned by linguistic medium, discourse, and culture. For a pragmatist, the politics of future is always up for grabs: neither discovering the “true” subjectivity nor the “real” ontology can fully determine where we will head next. What a critical inquiry can do in this context is to reconstruct the storylines of a problematic situation by drawing useful connections across historically and spatially interrelated actors, discourses, practices, and events—“useful” in the sense of helping us access as many alternatives as possible, expanding our present conditions of possibility.

If we consider “history” as a variety of narrative threads woven out of events and things, the selection process of *what* constitutes a problematic situation is implicitly imbued with the weavers’ present concerns for what is to be done (Satia, 2020). This may be especially the case for the spatial experiences of multicultural suburbs where the complex welter of heretical identities (diverse worldviews, epistemologies, knowledge systems) *and* the existential problems of co-inhabitation must be addressed through contingent, context-specific solutions. Thus, the key task facing urban politics writers is to not only study the discourses and practices that attest to the plurality of the social, but to compose new storylines based on empirical events and practical materialities with a better future in mind.

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