

Jedediah Purdy's Environmental Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the work of Jedediah Purdy, the theme of two sequential issues of *The Conrad Grebel Review*. In it, the guest editor situates Purdy in his American context and outlines his affection-based environmental politics, how his love of nature informs his political and religious sensibilities, his call for a new commonwealth and a transformed politics, and his exhortation to citizens to speak up for what they value and want to see sustained. The article also surveys and connects the six invited responses to Purdy that appear in the two issues and announces that Purdy's response will appear in the second issue.

Jedediah Purdy is a legal scholar whose recent work has focused on the impact of environmental law on American culture and politics, the scope of which includes everything from distribution of wealth to social justice to built infrastructure. He challenges the presupposition that environmentalism is a discrete political movement, demonstrating how human relations with the non-human world—and how those relations have changed throughout American history—are inextricably intertwined with how Americans have thought about social order, civic obligations, local adaptation, national identity, and moral life. In short, environmental law is connected to visions of political economy.

This essay provides an introduction to Purdy's environmental politics by situating his arguments in his affection for place. The first section offers my interpretation of Purdy's renowned "earnestness" as his taking seriously the connective bonds between people and their community—other inhabitants, animals, built and natural environments—to form the basis for a commonwealth. In the second section I will survey six invited responses to Purdy's environmental politics that appear in this CGR issue

and the next issue, showing how they connect not only to Purdy's project but also to each other. These responses draw together both religious and political engagements with his work. I will conclude with showing how these engagements open up ways of seeing how Purdy's love of nature informs his religious and political sensibilities. The next issue will present the remaining three essays as well as Purdy's response to all six essays.

LOVE AND WOUNDS

Isaac Villegas summarizes his take on Jedediah's private Instagram account, saying, "Purdy loves nature; he loves the earth."¹ Is a public intellectual allowed to be so unselfconsciously sentimental? Purdy started his career with a *Glamour* magazine photoshoot and was compared by National Public Radio to author Dave Eggers. He now teaches at Columbia Law School after teaching at Duke Law School for fifteen years. Purdy's legal scholarship has been published in the *Yale Law Journal* and the *Harvard Law Review*, and his essays on American political and cultural life appear regularly in *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and *N+1* among many other venues. But the dust jacket of his book, *This Is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth*, shows Purdy standing among the roots of a sequoia with the earnest grin of a bohemian tree-hugger. That kind of sincerity doesn't usually play in the public square. Purdy's reception bears this out. The satirical website *McSweeney's*—founded by Dave Eggers (coincidence?)—roasted Purdy in "Jedediah in Love," making fun of his hope for sincerity in *For Common Things*.² Twenty years later, the conservative *National Review* used Purdy as the whipping boy for the Green New Deal (GND), citing his appealing to it as a realistic environmental policy as a "summary for the vagueness, silliness, and posturing" of the GND campaign in general.³ Writers, it appears, are willing to be cruel if they think it will elevate their own voice. At least *McSweeney's* is funny.

The through-line for both dismissals twenty years apart is not

¹ Isaac S. Villegas, "Know the world, know yourself," *Christian Century*, August 31, 2016, 36.

² Todd Pruzan, "Jedediah in Love," *McSweeney's*, October 12, 1999. <http://www.mcsweeneys.net/1999/10/12jedediah.html>.

³ Kevin D. Williamson, "Conscription," *National Review*, February 14, 2019. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/conscription/>

only an unwillingness to take Purdy's arguments for democratic socialism seriously but also to leave guileless love unexpressed in political debates. *McSweeney's* makes a burlesque of this point, evinced in the very title of its fictional story. The *National Review* implies the same critique when it characterizes the GND as "mushiness" based on what is "desirable." Both brush-offs are political, though one less obviously so. *McSweeney's* literary irony was typical of 1990's insouciance masquerading as cultural sophistication. It's the politics of Lollapalooza concerts and comedian Jerry Seinfeld, using bleak apathy and cool detachment—entirely geared toward advertising, whether admitted or not—as a substitute for industrious participation. While disengagement became hard to sell after 9/11, the War on Terror, Iraq, and Trump, the underlying politics of indifference persevered as the substance behind the façade of libertarianism. Now, just-leave-me-alone political arguments are a pretense for a fundamental indifference to ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement), Islamophobia, Black Lives Matter, climate refugees, missing and murdered Indigenous women, civil rights and protections for migrant workers, and pretty much anything else that might be described as a matter of social justice. Like it or not, the gratification of "no hugging, no learning"⁴ and the ironic assurance that "with the lights out / it's less dangerous"⁵ are far from apolitical. They are the disposition of a blinkered self-reliance that is the condition of possibility for social structures, political policies, and economic advantages of white privilege.

Commonplace indifference is now naturalized as neutral and objective, rendering positionality and self-reflexivity as mere color commentary to the dominant political discourse. Mainstream cultural criticism, streaming from either left or right, is always constrained by the Dagnet imperative: "All we want are the facts, ma'am." The use of *ad hominem*s like "snowflake" demonstrates how genuine concern and emotional solidarity discredit political discussions. In this kind of society, Purdy's clarion call for more politics—for direct acknowledgement rather than passive avoidance—rooted in unfeigned compassion is a new basis for democratic engagement. Asserting ecological and egalitarian commitments means we have to

⁴ The mantra for the entire "Seinfeld" television series.

⁵ Lyrics from the rock band Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

announce what we care about and build our arguments for what needs to change and what needs to be preserved based on those affections.

Purdy says that collectively we're not good at making decisions that pertain to identifying goods that sustain human communities precisely because we're bad at reflecting on and arguing over the basic values we care deeply about. Our cultural suspicion of sincerity makes us "embarrassed to express commitments that seem 'subjective' or 'culturally relative.'"⁶ But for Purdy, drawing on Charles Taylor's ethics of articulacy, "a critical part of environmental politics is . . . the work of saying what we mean, finding words for what we see and feel."⁷ This exhortation to voice boldly what few have been willing to voice before is a political sensibility Purdy has had throughout his career. When he left college in 1997, his motto was Czesław Miłosz's "'What is unpronounced tends to nonexistence,' and a corollary, that pronouncing things might bring them into being."⁸ Finding one's voice isn't just a task for novelists or memoirists; it's the first step for an environmental politics rooted in how we see the world and why it matters. From here we can begin to understand what holds together a people living in the same place and what pulls them apart. It begins by stating clearly what we're attached and devoted to—who we are and why we care about what we want sustained.

This kind of sincerity is naturally at home in the academy even when it is ridiculed outside it. If being earnest is a "kick me" sign on the back of a public intellectual, it's equally the credentials on scholars' nameplates. We academics receive Purdy's sincerity without batting an eye, revealing our own sensitivity and earnestness. The stereotypical absent-minded professor—the one who doesn't know when to turn it off in social situations, constantly rambling on about arcane matters that makes everyone within earshot cringe—models this absence of pretense. Purdy's academic readers can embrace our social awkwardness as facilitating a disposition that helps communicate what matters most to us. While the academy isn't exactly the platform for effective political action, it can be a hothouse for a counter-

⁶ Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), 265.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 265-66.

⁸ Purdy, "Accidental Neoliberal," *N+1* 19 (Spring 2014). <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-19/politics/the-accidental-neoliberal/>

cultural disposition conducive to something like Purdy's environmental politics.

However, the key characteristic of this disposition is not seriousness but love. Purdy admits that sincerity can easily be co-opted, its critical edges commodified and smoothed over as another undulation of the neoliberal snake. At the heart of his political sensibility are his memories of growing up on a small farm in Chloe, West Virginia. Featuring his heritage risks being criticized for nostalgia and seeking out origins for identity politics. Pastoral images and coal miners' plights will tend to do that. Yet he continues to write about West Virginia after expressing his ambivalence. There is no substitute for political action, but writing about places like Chloe creates sensibilities through imagination. Purdy often refers to Wendell Berry as a source of inspiration. Like Berry's advocacy of rural America, Purdy educates readers' affections.⁹ He mentors the sensibility to state who we are and why we care about what we want sustained through the instruction "to remember, in detail and without apology, how the world has looked to people, now mostly dead, who believed in its political transformation."¹⁰ Extraction economies have marred that world, but as the poet says, "Nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent."¹¹ Love, hope, and joy for Purdy are registered precisely in the wounds that reveal the wholeness of a place, what local communities are working to preserve. Wreckage is of course disappointing, but expressing concern for what has been ruined both indexes what must be changed and articulates the bond, the affections, that inspire the desire for change.

Chloe itself doesn't materialize in Purdy's writing, but the mystery is generative, encouraging readers to wonder what kind of new politics and new modes of belonging can emerge from a sense of connection to obscure laughed-at places. Since Google has almost no helpful information on Chloe, I asked a friend from West Virginia to describe it. He said it could fit in his university's chapel. "It's a general store and a couple houses along the road. That store looks like you can get groceries and your chainsaw blade

⁹ For an account of how Berry's fiction is an education in affections pertinent for environmental ethics, see Joseph R. Wiebe, *The Place of Imagination: Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Community, Affection, and Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Purdy, "Accidental Neoliberal."

¹¹ W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animal's Desertion," *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York: Knopf, 1971), 335-36. Quoted in Purdy, *After Nature*, 149.

sharpened.” Anything else? “There’s a church house someplace, if I recall correctly.” That’s it.

Reading Purdy can make us feel that he is daring us to call his bond to this place sentimental bullshit. But we don’t, because we all feel bonds to places whose significance is difficult to describe to outsiders. Again, we academics tend to feel this acutely because we rarely work where we grew up. Moreover, we are enculturated in practices of double-think that admit the scholarly importance of situatedness and social location for research yet we pretend that our ideas have nothing to do with our heritage, which we bury in book acknowledgements and dedications. The familiarity of nostalgia often does not breed contempt but insecurity. In Purdy’s work to articulate how the world looks to people who believe in transformation, we find a “world-making” activity—telling the stories about a place that engender its local community. Coming from West Virginia, Purdy’s writing about land as a focus for a new politics, a new way of belonging together, emerges from his own intimate experiences of fear, frustration, vulnerability, and disillusionment. Stories of protest and eulogy contextualize his political analysis and criticism. The result is a keen awareness for how place shapes politics, which is voiced in what matters most and what’s most at stake, about the places to which we belong.

These connections through love and wounds, empathy and damage, are essential for a “commonwealth”—an economy, a community, and a way of living. “Connecting, sometimes in terrible conditions, is the precondition of politics.”¹² Structural racism and the history of colonialism shape how humans connect to each other and the world around them. One way Purdy makes these structures and their impact on the earth concrete is by describing humanity as an infrastructure species: “our powers, our sociability, our nature as creatures living on this earth, are all shaped in deep ways by our built environment, which weighs in at about three thousand tons per person as a global average.”¹³ This environment conceals interdependence

¹² Jedediah Purdy, “Maybe Connect,” *LA Review of Books*, October 4, 2015. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/maybe-connect/>.

¹³ Jedediah Purdy, “Living Together Shouldn’t Put Us at War with One Another or the Earth: An Interview with Jedediah Purdy,” *Jacobin Magazine*, October 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/jedediah-purdy-this-land-environment-climate-change-denialism-ecology>.

and the systematic racism that determines where and how people live. Purdy's environmental politics aims to change the infrastructure. The GND exemplifies this kind of change to the extent that it would "rebuild the systems that make modern life possible."¹⁴ Purdy says the GND is "an explicit engagement with the value of life, an effort to secure a humane future in a world where we do not live by exploiting one another."¹⁵ He argues that before America can develop plans for reparations or redistributive policies it needs a commonwealth. What would make this possible is the GND. It is a concrete example of his affection-based environmental politics, the engagements with which we now turn.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

Purdy's work as a whole is a resistance to the various forces influencing us to avoid politics. Purdy turns to the land—the physical and experiential qualities of the places we call home, which we share with people whose lives we don't know and didn't choose to be interdependent with and yet ineluctably are by virtue of our cohabitation—as a turn toward politics.

The six essays on Purdy that appear in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* and the next are reflections and arguments on this connection between land and politics. Their primary focus is on *This Land Is Our Land* and how US land has been claimed by violent, imaginative, mapping and narrative practices in ways that have created wealth, identity, and inequality. Purdy writes about land politics and how extractive economies have transformed American landscapes into political battlegrounds. Here he exemplifies thinking in response to landscape, the central question of which is, "How might land . . . be involved in political reconciliation?" The six essays consist in authors responding to different lands from different perspectives in ways that resonate with Purdy's political and ecological concerns. For Purdy, going to nature is not an escape from the world but a return to places of wounds, which can provide a new vantage point from which to see the world.

The authors were asked to respond to the following questions: If politics

¹⁴ Eric Klinenberg, "The Great Green Hope," *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2020, 55.

¹⁵ Jedediah Purdy, "The Spiritual Case for Socialism," *The New Republic*, February 19, 2019. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153024/spiritual-case-socialism-martin-hagglund-book-review>.

and ecology are now inextricably intertwined, what difference do religious reflections, experiences, and histories on nature make for that politics? How does spiritual or theological reflection from places of wounds shape or inform a new perspective on politics, economics, or social structures—i.e., on the infrastructures of our interdependence? Put differently, what role does religious thinking have in developing a commonwealth: a plurality of communities with locally adapted economies that neither degrades humans nor exhausts the landscape? In short, how do religious, theological, or spiritual reflections on the meaning of land contribute to the kind of political reconciliation Purdy suggests is necessary for both economic and ecological change?

Two essays explicitly address how Christianity can be a resource for Purdy's environmental politics. Purdy is skeptical about religious interpretations of nature. He does not discard religious impulses *per se* but wants to separate human desire for meaning and politics from nature. American perceptions of the environment have religious roots. Consider two examples of environmental visions Purdy analyzes.¹⁶ First, that human labor transforms nature from wilderness to garden. The view here is that wilderness must be redeemed, i.e., developed and economically productive. Second, that nature is a pleasing and notable contrast to human nature. Some areas should be sheltered from development to remain an access point to something higher than what we could imagine or become on our own. Both these views remain today and bear religious impulses, and both have implications on history and environmental law but also on how we see ourselves and our relation to nature.

The problem with these views for Purdy is the presumption that nature has an overarching and unifying logic or purpose. Nature has no point of view, no perspective that humans should try to enter into to know what to do. Or, as Herbert McCabe puts it, "The wind and the waves don't achieve any aim, there is nothing that counts as success in their thrashing around."¹⁷ According to Purdy, ethics can only follow nature if one is a monotheist. Monotheism unifies the disparate aspects of nature in the unity of the Creator's mind; unity comes from Creator rather than politics. Environmental law

¹⁶ Purdy, *After Nature*.

¹⁷ Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 8.

and politics have been rooted in the idea that nature's value is separate from human valuation and independent from us. For Purdy, this idea must be left behind: humans have always been selective in what they focus on and value in nature and they should stop pretending these values are "natural." He still wants to say nature has meaning and material worth but without discerning that meaning from within nature itself, separate from what humans confer upon it. Purpose and meaning are unnatural. The basis for his materialist view of nature is ethical, which he aligns with the motivation for nature writing in general: "an effort to note the kinds of harm one is involved in, the things one depends on, and the pleasures and responsibilities that might arise from understanding both."¹⁸

Peter Dula criticizes Purdy's assumption that at the heart of naturalism—that environmental ethics is grounded in a vision and unity of nature distinct from human enterprises—is monotheism. He argues that since the assumption that nature is the ground for ethics can be found in atheistic scientific discourse, the real issue is the assumption that "some questions . . . can be decided by something other than human judgement." The problem is the avoidance of human struggle and work to figure problems out for ourselves. The issue is a broken notion of responsibility, something that can be fixed by adding more politics, specifically more democracy. Religious arguments and activism here can be part of the convocation of voices rallying for improved democracy.

Similar to Dula's suggestion for religious sources and allies for Purdy's political project, Sarah Stewart-Kroeker gives an example of religious imagery as a possible horizon for Purdy's political ecology, i.e., the way environments shape the qualities and interactions of people brought together by virtue of living in the same place. While Purdy offers the commonwealth as that horizon, Stewart-Kroeker suggests it could be imagined as an *eschatological* commonwealth, one that resembles the body of the resurrected Christ with visible wounds. In this image, the wounds of human and non-human creation remain a focus for how the commonwealth is constituted. For Christians, this eschatological commonwealth would avoid the moral escapism of naturalism by resisting the depoliticizing urge to see past material nature as

¹⁸ Jedediah Purdy, "Thinking Like a Mountain: On Nature Writing," *N+1* 29 (Fall 2017). <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-29/reviews/thinking-like-a-mountain/>.

it is to an imagined whole in a divinely recreated heaven and earth. Stewart-Kroeker suggests that foregrounding this theological connection of wounds through the resurrection would help the political formation of Purdy's commonwealth by giving a concrete image, a visible horizon, for how we share each other's wounds and flourishing. Imagining an eschatological commonwealth is neither escapism nor naïve moralism but rather part of a political formation of environmental solidarity.

Understanding humanity as an infrastructure species and focusing on infrastructure as the locus of transformation illustrates how the image of the commonwealth matters for the formation of participants in the political project. While Purdy grounds his analysis of infrastructure on racism and colonialism, Daniel Sims argues that colonialism continues to haunt Purdy's political ecology. Colonialism will remain a part of the new commonwealth's landscape, if it doesn't reassess how the new relationships it constitutes and its vision of an imagined homeland are still formed through material inhabitation on stolen land. Colonialism notoriously violates both bodies and land; however, wounds are neither experienced nor shared equally. Neither the salve nor the memory of the injuries should be seen as held in common. If foregrounding traces of violence is central to forming political solidarity in a democratic, post-neoliberal commonwealth, then attention must first be drawn to the cruelty done to the once-sovereign owners of the land on which that commonwealth aspires to take root. The implication of Sims's argument turns Purdy's critique around: the presumed givenness that all American politics is inevitably formed on stolen land is itself depoliticizing, a way of settling the question of colonialism's impact on his political project by means of something other than human judgment.

These three critical engagements with Purdy in this issue will be followed by three more that look to their own religious traditions and places as resources for bringing the commonwealth in speech to material reality.

If democratic solidarity, perforce, comes from reckoning with rather than denying how class, race, and the environment relate to one another, and if religion is not inevitably de-politicizing but can be a helpful resource for increasing democratic judgments, then looking at the caste system in India is instructive. John Boopalan suggests that the way the caste system uses race, class, and environment to organize collective life shows that the issue

is not just a matter of cultural differences but the validity of the nation state. His description of Dalits in India resonates politically with colonial erasure in North America. A populist movement that forms a new commonwealth must redress structural racism that some people and places bear more than others. Centering these voices, this time in an international context, will be imperative to a genuinely new and substantive life together. But all conversations, Boopalan admonishes, must begin locally, with the material conditions, experiences, histories, and traditions of the ground where a new commonwealth might take root.

The final two essays are local narratives that showcase how one's own self-reflection can emerge from listening to Purdy, how his reflections open up a way of looking at one's own place.

Julia Kasdorf searches for resources in her Northern Appalachian home, a site of gas drilling and fracking, to build new relationships with human and non-human inhabitants. Pennsylvania was an attempt at a new commonwealth, an example of a radical and practical one based on Quaker religious convictions that aspired to be free of slavery and in treaty with Indigenous nations. Exploring both the history and her own nostalgia for her family farm in Pennsylvania is a synecdoche for what has commemorated and fractured people in her state since the Revolution. Pairing God and land or blood and soil to narrate the politics of landownership turns out to tell the same story. Formulating a different kind of politics with a different narrative involves reckoning with one's nostalgia, both personal and collective, which often reanimates old narratives, the old pairings. The connection between nostalgia and politics is particularly manifest when settler colonialism determines not only land ownership but also popular culture, where sports teams' racist mascots matter more than Black lives. But a counter-memory engenders a practice of solidarity, of reciprocal flourishing, that resonates with Boopalan. Kasdorf continues to use dishpan water to hydrate a rosebush her mother planted after returning from Calcutta when she couldn't stand to see clean water washed down the drain. Hers is a material practice that is literally radical—it gets to the roots—and is intended to turn toward rather than divide people, a life impacted by the necessary conditions for others' flourishing.

Like Kasdorf, Isaac Villegas uses Purdy's journey for a new political

vision sourced by an environmental imagination that looks at human relationships through the place they inhabit, which simultaneously hold them together and break them apart. While Purdy has Thoreau as his guide, Villegas uses voices from his own religious tradition, trailing 16th-century Anabaptist eccentrics through the woods. Trees, more specifically, sequoias, are the focus of his environmental imagination, revealing how the world works, what matters, and what the stakes are. Tellingly, these trees are burning. Yet this does not mean the political vision they generate is damned. Rather it should be understood within nature's rhythms of growth, decay, death, and rebirth. This vision is far from sentimental, since it not merely incorporates but constituted by damage and wounds. The epithet "tree hugger" usually refers to a saccharine naïveté that only produces idealism, but for Villegas the love of trees is an unrelieved mourning that engenders struggle. This struggle clarifies its political vision, not as a perfected whole abstracted from the fray but in the dualisms the sequoias dramatize: decay is growth; drowning water brings solidarity; the resurrected body remains broken. So too religion and politics non-dualistically perform the struggle. Seeing the crucified in nature's flames is a theological political vision for struggle—for solidarity and broken hearts, for baptism and protests. Hope, Villegas reminds us through Dorothy Soelle, lies in the struggle itself, not in what it produces. We love and fight, hold together and break apart, build up and pull down without regard for tomorrow.

These six essays help foreground the importance of understanding Purdy's environmental politics and the meaning of commonwealth through love and wounds. Purdy's environmental politics is a version of democratic socialism that takes seriously the possibility of love and the ineluctable fact of wounds in the modern world we have made. His criticism of "global hypercapitalism" that was the means for making this world is based on how all of life has been conscripted "in a world-historical gamble concerning the effects of indefinite growth, innovation, and competition."¹⁹ The scale of response must match

¹⁹ Jedediah Purdy, "Wendell Berry's Lifelong Dissent," *The Nation*, September 9, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wendell-berry-essays-library-of-america-review/>.

the scale of effect; we need a global internationalism that elevates security and solidarity with those who feel the unequal distribution of harms and risks most acutely. What that means for most of us is recognizing we are the stakes and not the gamblers. The GND as infrastructure change articulates this recognition. It is an example of a politics that can address climate change because it is “a politics that takes the notion of the human being and their place in the world as part of its stakes.”²⁰

Who are we as humans and what is our place in the world? For Purdy, “We are creatures who care, whose nature is to grow infinitely attached to finite things. What we truly believe is worth our time, the natural things and the cultural forms in which we find the richness of this life, gives us an imperative to take responsibility for them.”²¹ These lines capture Purdy’s religious sensibility and love of nature and how they are tied together politically. Care for basic values and the work of sustaining human goods is measured in one’s life, in one lifetime. Jedediah Purdy in nature—his assiduous smile among the roots of sequoias whose conflagration besets his friend Isaac Villegas’s beleaguered dreams—ties together sincere meaning, material conditions, relentless labor, and determined politics.

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²⁰ Jill Kubit, Katy Lederer, Kate Marvel, Jedediah Purdy, Christine Smallwood, Mari Tan, “Parenting and Climate Change,” *N+1* 36 (Winter 2020). <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-36/politics/parenting-and-climate-change/>.

²¹ Purdy, “The Spiritual Case for Socialism.”