New wilderness mobilities: Cycling against climate change, mass extinction and habitat destruction

Introduction

Slung over the tailgate of a Ford F-150 pickup truck, a mountain bike lies still, like a small child crumpled over their parent’s shoulder getting carried off to bed. The bike’s front wheel bobs ever so slightly as the heavy duty, seven thousand pound machine, its fuel tank brimming with a million dead plants and animals, revs its engine and rumbles out of the gas station back onto the highway. This scene plays out regularly across southern British Columbia (home of Vancouver), a hub for cyclists and nature-loving locals and tourists following trails becoming swollen through Instagram fame. The bike may have been heading to one of B.C.’s fast multiplying ‘heli-biking’ outfits, where thrill-seekers with money to spend replace the time-intensive work of cycling up mountains with a quick flight. The environmental contradiction between the bicycle and the Ford F-150, one of North America’s most ubiquitous vehicles, may not be as lofty as that of bikes commanding helicopters to ply summer skies increasingly filled with smoke from forest fires made worse by climate change. But it nevertheless evokes the deep uncertainty on the ground encompassing cycling’s value to the more-than-human world in a time of cascading environmental emergencies: will cycling animate ecologically better ways of living together, or simply accentuate and reproduce the relentless speed and ecological catastrophes of automobility and neoliberal fossil capitalism?

The central aim of this chapter is to illuminate ecologically good cycling practices. To this end I relate cycling practices (Popan 2018; Watson 2013; Larsen 2014; McIlvenny 2015; Spinney 2015, 2006; Jungnickel and Aldred 2014; Jones 2005) with pragmatic sociology, which explores how social practices, actors and objects are publicly justified and morally legitimated by common goods, including ecology (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006[1991]; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Ecology, defined here not as a scientific paradigm but as a uniquely non-anthropocentric common good that attributes moral worth to human and other-than-human beings and their habitats (Latour 1998), has faced tremendous difficulty securing such legitimacy as evidenced by the limited electoral success of green parties. Its public justification is elusive, in part, because ecology has more ontological variation than is often assumed. Rather than one “common ecological world” or way in which ecology assembles the common good, there may be multiple (Blok 2013). In light of ecology’s moral precariousness and ontological variety it is vital to consider practices or “regimes of engagement” (Thévenot 2002) below the public level of moral justification that help build a pragmatic foundation for ecology in everyday life. This chapter examines how cycling practices can build such a foundation for three ecological common goods based on, respectively, the amelioration of climate change, mass extinction and habitat destruction.

Mobility practices that help address a warming world, the extirpation of nonhuman life and despoliation/fragmentation of biodiverse habitats together form what I call ‘new wilderness mobilities.’ The first section of this chapter discusses cycling practices in relation to ecology and pragmatic sociology in turn, before defining the concept of wilderness mobilities and describing the study on which my analysis is based, conducted on cycling in major Canadian cities between 2014 and 2018. The bulk of the chapter investigates three kinds of ecologically good cycling practices, using my foray into each to illustrate paradigmatic techniques of new wilderness mobilities—workful play, floating and de-roading. The chapter concludes by discussing the
importance of assembling the ‘the good cycling society’ around ecologically good cycling practices that also ameliorate social injustice, including complex cycling inequalities related to gender, gentrification and infrastructure (Psarikidou 2020).

**Cycling as pragmatic ecological engagement**

On the surface, cycling seems like a good ecological practice, generating minuscule amounts of greenhouse gases, harm to other human/other-than-human beings and habitat destruction. However, that some cycling practices may be ecologically good raises the possibility that others may be ecologically bad. Whether or not cycling advances or undermines the ecological common good depends on what other actors and objects cycling becomes associated with. Cycling practices cannot be isolated from the wider mobility norms, plans and infrastructures with which the production of emergent cycling systems are implicated and interwoven (Watson 2013). Notably, people who cycle for travel around the world are not strongly motivated by environmental issues, but rather by convenience (Danish Government 2017). Despite their green image, emerging cycling communities generally fail to identify with ecology or any other common good, even in places like Copenhagen where more than a third of people commute by bike (Green et al. 2012; Freudendal-Pedersen 2015). Most cycling practices are not connected so directly to environmental harm as in my heli-biking example above, or used to publicly justify ecological destruction as when South Korean wrapped up new pathways for cycling in a massive river damming project (Chihyung 2016). But it has become clear that the promotion of accelerated cycling, for instance through electrification and cycling highways, “is not only mimicking the worst, disassociative effects of fast automobility culture, but [also] stripping cycling of its key pleasures and possibilities: namely greater opportunities for sensory engagement and social connection - in a world where both are in decline” (Wild 2019: 236; Popan 2019). Furthermore, by enhancing and ‘greening’ gentrification, cycling is exacerbating in places like Vancouver the social inequities that compound environmental injustice (Golub et al. 2016).

In spite of these liabilities that challenge any straightforward qualification of cycling as good for the environment, there are signs that cycling, more than motorized ways of moving, carries strong potential to advance ecology as a common good. Images of smiling cyclists may festoon the ‘planning porn’ selling new luxury condo towers, but cycling is also mobilized even more broadly through text and image to construct the green visions and lifestyles of environmental activists and ecologically-minded citizens. As Horton (2006: 46) puts it, cycling features prominently in environmentalist discourse in part because its physical effort “demonstrates ethical and political commitment to the environment; by cycling one parades not only the taking of personal responsibility for one’s own body, but also for the inter-connected bodies of ‘the community’ and planet.” The same multisensory strategies, kinaesthetic awareness and affectionate capacities that cyclists bring to bear on their nonviolent engagements with other humans (Larsen 2014; Spinney 2006; Jungnickel and Aldred 2014) also apply to nature and more-than-human lifeworlds—whose apprehension in a cacophonous, urbanized world demands increasingly careful attention. Such civil capacities, strategies and awareness (not to mention cyclists’ engagement with weather) cut to the heart of cycling’s ecological potential.

French pragmatic sociology, largely neglected by American pragmatists (Frère and Jaster 2019), grew out of work by students of Bourdieu on how people and things become good. In On Justification, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006[1991]) examine a plurality of contradictory common
goods to which people appeal to resolve disputes by making moral appeals to a higher common humanity. These include a Rousseauian *civic* worth based on equality, solidarity and democracy; an Adam Smith inspired *market* worth based on fair competition in an open marketplace; and an *industrial* worth that champions the planners, engineers and technical experts who make the world a more efficient system. For Boltanski and Thévenot such common goods form “justificatory grammars” (Blokker 2011: 253) that morally qualify persons but also material objects and institutions to create “common worlds” populated by heterogenous moral beings. Later work elaborated this model to include “green worth” or ecology, which Latour (1998: 15) sees as questioning a common humanity by extending the Kantian idea of never treating nonhuman persons simply as means “but always also as ends.” Expressions of ecological worth vary cross-culturally, contributing to its ontological variation (Blok 2013). North American manifestations of ecology more readily embrace compromises with the market (Lamont and Thévenot 2000).

Recognizing that moral engagements for the common good are not always possible and difficult to coordinate, Thévenot (2002) develops pragmatic sociology by adding two other “pragmatic regimes of engagement,” or social practices for coordinating with oneself, that operate below the level of public justification. The first, the “regime of familiarity” entails a person’s customized habitat of idiosyncratic linkages with other beings that is difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced it. Familiarized practices attach a person to an ‘entourage’ of living and nonliving beings, effectively mapping their personality onto a local environment. The second, the “regime of regular planned action” privileges an instrumental engagement with the world built on conventional utility and intentionality. In regularized environments, humans become accountable for, and conflated with, their plans, choices and functions. These three ways of engaging and ‘formatting’ the world describe a spectrum, ranging from the narrowest conventions and lowest level of legitimacy (familiar) to the widest and highest (moral). Considering these regimes together, Thévenot observed that a neoliberal emphasis on regular planned actions comes at the expense of both moral and familiar engagements, creating a “structural tyranny” of one regime of engagement over others (Blokker 2011: 256). In sum, pragmatic sociology follows regimes of moral, planned and familiar engagement but also their dynamic interplay. I apply each of these regimes and this interplay to extend insight into cycling practices that relate to ecology.

My analysis pursues three lines of application. First, the structural tyranny of regular planned action clearly resonates with neoliberal representations of cycling as a product of intentional action, economic productivity and individualized environmental responsibility (Aldred 2012; Cupples and Ridley 2008). To challenge this neoliberal tyranny, I explore how functional cycling transport expands beyond the commute, showing ways that people incorporate nature into their regular cycling and how this opens up planned actions to less instrumental ways of engaging the world. I also explore how regular, planned cycling actions depend on familiar engagements that differ across social groups, leading to the suggestion that customizing more-than-human cycling environments for women can help grow cycling as mass ecological transport for addressing climate change. My second application of pragmatic sociology takes it deeper into the more-than-human world by examining a largely ignored structural tyranny, one of familiarity, that oppresses other-than-human animal and plant individuals by denying them the intentional and moral agency required of more conventionalized regimes of engagement. By cultivating these agencies and changing people’s minds about other-than-human persons, cycling practices can help fight the mass extinction of nonhuman life. Finally, my third application analyzes how
equitable, more-than-human environments for cycling that foster civil interactions between humans and other animals and plants might be infrastructured, and in so doing bring about habitat repair via ‘de-roading.’

I call cycling practices that advance ecological common goods ‘wilderness mobilities.’ On a rapidly urbanizing planet the romantic idyll and dictionary definition of wilderness as pristine nature untouched by humans is dead and dangerous; dead because in reality even the most remote places are disturbed by human activity, dangerous because the growing allure of this idyll in popular imagination helps fuel the motorized degradation of what biodiverse, intact habitats remain. Wilderness mobility has nothing to do with this dictionary definition, but rather with the already existing wild nature right under our noses with which people might reconnect if they could slow down and notice it (Haupt 2013). Wilderness mobilities bring people to a ‘new wilderness,’ one that cannot be reached in the jets, helicopters, cars, trucks, ships and their aerial, terrestrial and marine highways that degrade nature while whisking humans to its putatively wildest manifestations. Wilderness mobilities deal with this ecological contradiction—the bicycle inside the outsized, gas-guzzling pick-up; the wilderness enthusiast who flies and drives and ferries and drives before they walk or cycle—by encompassing (im)mobilities that treat nonhuman animals, plants and habitats with the dignity they deserve from the start. The new wilderness is not remote. It does not lie beyond the edge of the city. Rather, the new wilderness lies just past the edge of our ordinary thinking about the city (ingrained since Plato as the civilized place for citizens where the wild things are not), flickering on the shifty borderlands between humans and coyotes, hares, orcas, raccoons and crows.

“How we live where we live is what makes us part of a natural ecosystem,” notes Haupt (2009: 33), and the city is where the (vast) majority of Canadians live and make their impact on the more-than-human world. For this reason, the ethnographic data supporting this chapter focus on the urban wild. Part of a larger study conducted between 2014 and 2018 on cycling and cycling infrastructure in major Canadian cities, I used mobile video ethnography and ‘go-along’ methodology to track how people access wild nature they themselves deem to be significant via cycling. This either took the form of incorporating nature into the commute to work or school or configuring nature as a destination in its own right. Fifteen such ride-alongs inform the observations and findings discussed here. My primary concern is not to bring out the ethnographic nuances of performing cycling, but rather to re-situate cycling practices through higher scopes as ecologically good practices in the context of Canada. Canada offers a critical case study of wilderness mobilities, not because of its renowned nature and ecological significance (although these factors play a role) so much as its status as a wealthy, urbanized nation whose halting efforts to transition away from extreme car dependence and fossil capitalism carry important lessons for other low-cycling contexts (e.g. the United States, Britain and Australia). In what follows, each section focuses on a particular form of wilderness mobilities and way of assembling ecologically good cycling.

Three formations of ecologically good cycling

Cycling (against climate change) for ecological transport

One way in which cycling can contribute to the ecological common good is by reassembling mass transport, or regular planned action for everyday travel, using vehicles that are virtually emissions free. Cycling offers cheap regular transport powered by kinetic energy generated with
of the human body rather than fossil fuels created when countless dead plants and animals decayed under heat and pressure into hydrocarbons over hundreds of millions of years. Cycling constitutes ‘ecological transport’ by both enhancing humanity’s social and physical resilience to, while addressing the immediate causes of, climate change. Despite this ecological potential, few people in Canada cycle for transport. According to the Canadian Census, in 2016 people cycling comprised only 1.6% of all commuters (up from 1.2% in 1996), compared to over 80% relying on motor vehicles (Statistics Canada 2017). And those who do, like people in Copenhagen, appear to cycle not for the environment but for convenience. However, the disconnect in Canada between cycling and transport relates, in part, to how policymakers and experts define transport. The Canadian Census, for example, measures cycling as the journey to work, ignoring other kinds of regular, planned cycling such as mobilities of care tied to chauffeuring and escorting kids and other unpaid domestic labour, even though such cycling accounts for about an equivalent proportion of trips as commuting (Sánchez de Madariaga 2013). By conflating cycling with commuting for paid work, conventional definitions of transport reinforce a neoliberal structural tyranny of planned action that reduces cycling to utilitarian, responsible choices by individuals for healthier journeys to the places where they are economically productive (Aldred 2012; Cupples and Ridley 2008).

I stumbled upon another kind of regular, planned cycling early on in my study outside of, yet in many cases overlapping with, the work commute and mobilities of care. While my research supported the finding that most people do not cycle for the environment or climate change per se, I found that many Canadians do cycle regularly for nature and for engaging with the wilder parts of their local environments. Sometimes this took the form of incorporating nature into pre-existing transport for work or care; other times nature or the urban wild acted as the primary purpose and destination. Whatever form it took, having nature and wilder things along made cycling on the whole more enticing, pointing to how changes in cycling might pull more Canadians out of their cars. On its surface, this regular nature cycling looks similar to commuting to work or school. My participants deployed the same functional objects to mitigate the risk of getting struck by a motor vehicle, which they assumed was ultimately their own responsibility, donning helmets and safety vests while affixing lights. Among participants who listened to music while cycling, many did so only in one ear, leaving their left ear to scan for approaching cars. In a telltale sign of intentional, planned engagement with the world, nearly every participant checked their phone before disembarking to review the weather, traffic conditions or their route(s), often tweaking their gear, pace or mood in response. However, some important differences emerged between purely instrumental work/school trips and those journeys that included or focused upon dwelling with nature.

En route to nature and most especially while ‘in’ it, however participants defined ‘it’— following Vannini and Vannini (2016) I assume that nature and wilderness can be found, for the most part, where and whenever people say they find it— participants were more playful. Heterogeneous natures, from pocket parks in dense central cities with robust cycling networks to fields beside new exurbs in farmland where bike lanes and trails are few and far between, precipitate play. Children also help. One parent in the suburbs, for example, captures the attitudes and tactics in general of parents in my sample who cycle with their children. He regularly sneaks a little nature time into the otherwise instrumental voyage to and from his daughter’s school:

Certainly when I’m cycling with (my five-year-old), but also for myself, I try and stay off routes that have no bike infrastructure, or have lots of car traffic. Riding with her on a
trailer bike, then bike lanes for sure at a minimum, with pathways preferred. Some areas we don’t bike to, other areas we choose our routes wisely. We prefer our route to school because it has a lot more forest trails and it has less traffic. It does have some stuff that’s bad for cycling, like baffle gates [or turnstiles] that make it hard to get through, but generally just staying off the roads is nice. It takes an extra ten minutes each way. Going home we have another route that takes 15 minutes longer, but it allows us to take a nice multi-use path with no traffic and to go through parks where we often stop and play.

(Interview 2016)

This parent captures a ubiquitous sentiment: “traffic” (re: motor vehicles)—its ever-present risk of violence but also the cacophonous, polluted environments it creates for anyone around who is not encased in a motor vehicle—opens a wide and challenging chasm between cycling and nature. Moreover this practice of adding time onto cycling transport in car dominated environs to make room for nature and play proved to be common (albeit not always frequent) for both familial co-cycling and individual commuters. Some participants expressed agony over the trade-off between an even slightly lesser commute time and nature play (very often opting, begrudgingly, for the former). The structural tyranny of regular, planned ways of cycling hinges, in part, on the production of time as a scarce, always-dwindling resource that should never be wasted or idled away.

Where nature creeps into cycling transport, particularly in voyages expressly for nature, it animates playful, sensorially expansive atmospheres that pry open the neoliberal tyranny of regular, planned action to reveal less intentional, more familiar ways of engaging the world. Some common forms of play I observed included spontaneity, a wider range of emotions, sharing of kinetic ‘energies’ (Philo et al. 2015), nonlinear routes, lower concern with clock time, anthropomorphization of animate and inanimate objects, greetings for familiar animals and plants and rampant breaking of road rules and regulations (e.g. side-by-side cycling with others to facilitate sociable co-cycling). What forms of cycling nature play share in common is the seriousness with which people practice them; I came to see it as workful play. Far from shunning risk, participants shifted it to ‘off-road’ urban environments—multi-use pathways and trails—where they could more fully embrace risk because these environments eliminated the possibility of being maimed or killed by a motor vehicle. Before going off-road and, for example, communing with an old tree or listening carefully to a river, most people employ instrumental objects in a functional way (e.g. arterial roads) but for a purpose for which they were not necessarily designed (i.e. escaping automobility), a common dynamic of serious play (Fusselman 2015). In my ride-alongs, the liminal shift from road to ‘not-road,’ typically via a path at the end of a cul-de-sac or a ramp off a street, brought a sudden transition between contradictory affective atmospheres—not unlike an ice-eating chinook sweeping into Calgary or a hurricane abruptly releasing its grip on Halifax.

Workful play in nature forms a paradigmatic technique of new wilderness mobilities by making people cycling feel more continuous and connected with the rest of life, but not one to which all people have equal access. This technique shows how cycling is not only about successfully accomplishing planned actions but also very much about customizing a familiar cycling habitant through idiosyncratic linkages with objects and other living beings, and reveals how the two are intertwined. On one hand, familiarized cycling practices are completely unconventional. To me, what looked like a stringy Sumac tree dangling precariously on the edge of a trail by a superhighway in Toronto, is to one of my ride-along partners but one, familiar
appendage of a single, rhizomatic individual who resembles a forest spanning the river valley who helps show the way. On the other hand, patterns in regimes of familiarity reveal differences and inequalities in who can successfully accomplish regular cycling for transport. For example, in Canada, as in other low cycling nations, many more men use cycling for transport than women (about 2:1). This difference is complex and systematic, and the regime of the familiar helps explain why.

Gender differences in cycling transport relate, in part, to women’s preferences for separated cycling lanes (Aldred et al. 2016). The expansion of dedicated infrastructures, particularly in high traffic areas and socio-economically marginalized neighbourhoods, has rightly become an important bicycle justice issue, and it should also be framed as an ecological (and climate change) issue. A dearth of desirable bike lanes seen as safe enough from ‘traffic’ disproportionately fragments and shrinks women’s (as well as children’s and older folks’) familiar cycling habitats, limiting where and why they can cycle for transport including, respectively, the urban wild and workful nature play. Compounding the gender gap in cycling transport are larger inequalities in unpaid domestic labour. Women are still expected to accomplish the lion’s share of unpaid domestic work, including chauffeuring and escorting children and grocery shopping through complex trip-chaining, which greatly expands the ‘entourage’ of living and nonliving beings attached to women as they cycle (e.g. on carrier bikes) while stretching their itinerary beyond the pale of dedicated bike lanes. Complex gender inequalities in familiarized cycling environments (see Psarikidou 2020) not only help explain why women are less likely to regularly accomplish cycling for functional transport, they also show how cycling itself is not living up to its ecological potential to ameliorate climate change by reducing transport-related greenhouse gas emissions (second in magnitude in Canada only to the oil and gas sector). Dedicated (and traffic-calmed) cycling routes, coupled with desirable nature connections and more equitable distributions of unpaid labour (and parental leave), stand to increase women’s cycling in particular and ecological transport in general. Any increase reverberates where it addresses half the population.

Floating (against mass extinction) with other-than-human persons

A second way in which cycling can contribute to the ecological common good is by reassembling relations with other-than-human beings, specifically by helping to reconceive such beings as individual persons who have a keen, subjective interest in their own flourishing and so are worthy of moral regard. If the neoliberal tyranny of regular planned action is intuitive to cycling scholars and activists, germane as it is to the cycling injustices and cycling gentrification threatening to mould emerging cycling systems into an ever more elitist and socially stratified enterprise (Golub et al. 2016), the structural tyranny of familiarity highlighted in this section is just the opposite (to my knowledge, an exploration of a ‘structural tyranny of familiarity’ is new). Furthermore, if cycling as emissions-free transport seems like an obvious technology for ameliorating climate change, by contrast it may seem more opaque as to how cycling can mitigate the mass extinction of other-than-human lives. Nonetheless, I suggest cycling affords a powerful, if under-utilized tool for doing so, not only by reducing in Canada the amount of (horrendously undocumented) roadkill-by-motor-vehicle—a pivotal symbol of, and bloodstain upon, the Anthropocene (Fishel 2019)—but also by creating more empathetic encounters between humans and nonhuman animals and plants, both domesticated and wild. Where workful-play acts as a technique for prying ecological cycling transport away from the neoliberal tyranny
of planned action, practices of ‘floating’ help pull away encounters with other-than-human persons from the even more insidious tyranny of human supremacism.

My study found that many cyclists regularly notice, encounter and greet other-than-human individuals, be they dogs, squirrels, starlings, raccoons or cedar trees. In Vancouver, I was amazed to discover how frequently these encounters involved crows. Crows dropping nuts and shellfish on the intersection. Crows in twos and threes stalking the Wendy’s parking lot. Crows dive-bombing passerbys for getting close to their nest. Hundreds of crows taking over the beach too rainy for the dogs (or their masters). Crows coalescing by the thousands into a great black murder streaming back to the roost at twilight (an awesome sight for cyclists flowing underneath). Crows stealing weapons from crime scenes and going viral on the internet (Collins 2016), and other improbable things. Crows occupy a special place among encounters with other-than-human persons, partly because of their high intelligence, creativity and sociality, but also simply because, given that their increasingly urban population growth eerily mirrors that of our own, “crows are the most common native wild being that humans regularly see” (Haupt 2009: 26). Cycling affords a unique vantage point to follow these wild beings and listen to and watch what they’re up to, particularly on Vancouver’s traffic-calmed neighbourhood bikeways (where dangerous motorists are fewer and local motorists more accustomed to cyclists). Some people enjoy cycling with crows because with a little bit of speed they can actively trace and almost participate in their peculiar, often playful lines of flight through the mongrel cityscape. Others employ a more meditative, quiescent technique, drifting along or floating with an individual crow, elaborating another paradigmatic technique of wilderness mobilities.

As my study progressed, I documented more of these mobile moments of stillness (Bissell 2007) wherein people on bicycles floated with crows and other animals and plants and communities of beings (e.g. rivers, beaches and forests). While the duration of these moments and the being(s) involved vary, they all feature a person cycling slowing down and seemingly ‘checking out’ from their immediate environs. In contrast to the action sequences of workful-play punctuating cycling in nature, and often difficult to articulate in words or even recollect without post-ride video elicitation (Spinney 2015), these passive periods of floating were not devoid of meaning or intensity of feeling. Rather, they were often described as moments of zen or inexplicable allure. They came with an expansive, if fleeting, sense of awe that compelled people to reevaluate what they thought they knew about other life forms, many of whom came into view as individuals in their own right. It may be that these cyclists, following studies of human brain activity during experiences of awe, were becoming ‘lost in the moment’ and more willing to step into uncertainty (CBC 2019), their very selves floating away from their regular, anthropocentric moorings. While awe carries the power to inspire dread (and demagoguery), it can also do the opposite, namely increase tolerance and bring different beings together. For some people, glimpsing a crow as a person with their own, rich sense of self elicits dread, raising disturbing thoughts about their thriving on a planet becoming inhospitable to most other beings. For others, it elicits interspecies empathy and hope, a stepping into of the uncertainty of a world after human supremacism.

Cycling has a salient role to play in bringing about interspecies justice and ending the wanton torture and extinction of nonhuman animals and plants. Albeit fleeting, ephemeral and sometimes difficult to recollect, sufficient numbers of cycling interactions with nonhuman animals and plants animate positive feelings of allure and awe to suggest that something about cycling itself—its minimal mass, moderate speed and nonexistent roadkill, plus its capacity to convey folks outside their familiar environments without removing their ability to sense and feel
other beings in the world—can help change people’s minds about the worth of other-than-human persons and challenge their oppression under a ‘tyranny of familiarity’. This tyranny operates by denying other-than-human persons both the intentional, cognitive agency and reasoning skills necessary for regular, planned action and the moral agency required to support, and have one’s interests and well-being qualify as part of, the common good. As a result, entire animal and plant kingdoms have largely ad hoc, unaccountable and non-conventional relations with humans. Domesticated animals who happen to flourish as members of our families and communities, for example, do not do so because they have been accorded standard legal status protecting their persons or because they have been accorded adapted citizenship rights and responsibilities, but rather because they happen to belong to the familiarized entourage of a generous pet owner or enlightened farmer.

Strong philosophical and scientific arguments already exist for extending standard moral obligations to nonhuman animals and plants (even citizenship in some cases) who were always more intelligent and more capable of participating in multispecies democracies than most people think (de Waal 2016; Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014; Hall 2011). However, we need more than reasoned argument to avoid the ongoing, rapidly unfolding mass extinction of nonhuman lives. We also require affective and affecting encounters with other-than-human persons in everyday life wherein people’s selves can float away from the deeply held human supremacist notion that only human persons are morally worthy of conventionalized forms of protection and respect. By increasing empathetic encounters with nonhuman persons, cycling can help redress the interspecies inequalities that underpin the ongoing extirpation of nonhuman life.

**Cycling (against roads) to repair habitat**

A third way in which cycling can contribute to the ecological common good entails ameliorating habitat destruction. Some habitat destruction in Canada comes from the acute, high profile despoliation of land, water and air by mining and hydrocarbon development, such as the oil or tar sands projects in Alberta that have transformed the province into a “first-world petro state” (Adkin 2016). But most habitat destruction, as elsewhere, owes to piecemeal degradation and fragmentation unfolding slowly yet inexorably over time, especially from unbridled road building. Roads, acting as a catalyst for further industrial activities, farming and urbanization, have splintered the world’s land (just as sea lanes fracture the sea) into more than 600,000 fragments, the vast majority of which are too small to support wildlife; only 7% are larger than 100km². The length of the world’s roads are expected to grow by more than 60% by 2050, with only 5% of roadless areas currently enjoying any legal protection (Ibisch et al. 2016). The last large roadless areas, in the Amazon, Indonesia, Russia and Canada, are already starting to splinter. While Canada is highly urbanized and densifying its central cities through transit and cycling-oriented development, its automobile-driven suburbs are growing much faster, carving up ever more of the countryside and hinterland into a latticework of cul-de-sacs, arterial roads and superhighways (Ibbitson 2018). In these suburbs, cultural icons of the Canadian ‘good life’ and political battlegrounds where national elections are won and lost, few people perceive roads as a problem unless they are not being built and repaired (or snowploughed) fast enough.

Like climate change and mass extinction, road-driven habitat loss is a “wicked” problem with no straightforward solution (Lazarus 2008). It, too, builds on the interplay between different regimes for engaging and formatting the world, including public justification, the regime with the broadest (yet most difficult to secure) conventions of moral legitimacy. As already discussed,
structural tyrannies by planned and familiar engagement weaken public justifications for ecology, but so too do dynamics within the regime of justification itself in which industrial and especially market worth tyrannize other ways of envisaging good cycling societies (including civic worth). De-roading, a third paradigmatic technique of wilderness mobilities, deals directly with the neoliberal, market-led capitalism that, perhaps more than any other factor, threatens to mimic in cycling “the worst, disassociative effects of fast automobility culture, … stripping cycling of its key pleasures and possibilities” (Wild 2019: 236). Grounded in active, everyday acts of “infrastructuring” (Star 1999), de-roading entails not so much cycling ‘off-road’ in car-free (or ‘car-light’) places in nature that happen to already exist, but rather the practice of bringing about such places in the first place—including the difficult political work of lobbying city councillors, parliamentarians and planners and persuading skeptical neighbours by appealing to higher common principles. De-roading involves slowly assembling new multi-use trails and pathways as well as retiring motor vehicle roads and returning these supposedly ‘public’ rights of way back to a diversity of mobile publics, either temporarily (e.g collective bike rides that shut down parts of the city to cars) or on a more permanent basis.
Two illustrative examples help convey the range of possibilities and some nuances of de-roading. The first, in Washington D.C., involves the case of Klingle Valley Trail and the wealthy neighbourhoods surrounding it. The trail (near the national zoo) replaced and helped decommission a local motor vehicle road, finally opening in 2017 after a quarter-century of community conflict strangely pulling in powerful Washington elites over what uses the space should accommodate. Ostensibly, the reconstructed 0.7 mile trail (see Figure 1) is a huge success and popular among residents. Scratch beneath the surface of the technically well-assembled nature pathway, however, and some critical ecological and civic limitations emerge. An expert in stream flow and turbidity who worked on the project recently opined during a walking tour (as part of the American Association of Geographers meeting in 2019) that simply leaving the road to become overgrown, while cosmetically less pleasing perhaps, would have resulted in a much healthier, flowing creek. Furthermore, the location of another multi-use nature trail in one of the richest neighbourhoods in Washington shows how de-roading can service gentrification and exacerbate “infrastructural inequalities” (Psarikidou 2020). It does not have to. A contrasting example, figuring prominently in my study as an urban wild in its own right and as a model and inspiration for the ‘ecological infrastructuring’ of cycling across Canada, lies in Canada’s capital city.

Ottawa’s National Capital Pathway system spans more than 600 kilometres of multi-use pathways separated from traffic across the region winding along rivers, canals and other natural corridors, the foundation for which was laid during the 1970s. Besides a strong ecological public justification, these pathways were also justified through civic worth as way of placing nature in the reach of all its (human) citizens. Today, this still-growing network of pathways offers a powerful model for de-roading, pulling humans who would otherwise be driving motor vehicles and spaces otherwise vulnerable to road building and further sprawl into biodiverse cycling habitats, habitats that afford inclusive opportunities for workful play and everyday moments for floating with other-than-human persons. Such ecological infrastructuring carries the potential to repair habitat lost to automobility, particularly where it helps guide the city’s growth. While Ottawa’s cycling pathways do not carry the same weight as, say, similar pathways in Oulu, Finland, which have been deployed as a fundamental basis of urban development, they nevertheless challenge car-oriented development through de-roading in a low cycling context. Where workful play pries cycling transport away from the neoliberal tyranny of planned action, and floating with other-than-human persons helps pry people from the tyranny of human supremacism, de-roading helps pull cycling away from the auto-industrial complex and tyranny of the market that continue to fuel the road-driven destruction of more-than-human habitat.

Confluences

This chapter set out to illuminate ecologically good cycling practices. Of course, the ecological worth of cycling is highly contested terrain. Not all cycling is good for the environment; much cycling, cycling policy and “bicycle justice” (Golub et al. 2016) remains disconnected from ecology, while some cycling reinforces wider mobility norms, plans and infrastructures that cause ecological destruction (Chihyung 2016). To bring ecologically good cycling into focus, I defined it as cycling that ameliorates climate change, mass extinction and habitat destruction. Of course these are broad (wicked), fast-moving and intertwined ecological crises to which humans ought to be mobilizing many and diverse ameliorations that extend far beyond the remit of this chapter (and cycling itself).
I focused on illustrating a few cycling practices and techniques, *workful play*, *floating* and *de-roading*—what I collectively call new wilderness mobilities—that address these intertwined ecological crises. Future research can hopefully identify further techniques and address blindspots in my analysis, such as the need for such techniques to disassemble the settler colonial nature of Canadian wilderness, cities and cycling. To illuminate new wilderness mobilities and some important, larger contexts in which they unfold I applied pragmatic sociology, contributing to research about ecology’s “multiple common worlds” and ontological plurality (Blok 2013) by refining these worlds according to specific ecological emergencies. Another contribution of this chapter is to include in the purview of pragmatic sociology the agency of other-than-human persons in a deeper, more meaningful way than has been accomplished thus far (Latour 1998). Specifically, I show how nonhuman beings suffer from a structural tyranny of familiarity wherein they are systematically denied the intentional agency required of regular, planned action and moral agency necessary to be considered worthy contributors to, and benefactors of, the common good. Insofar as the human rights project of the twentieth century aims to protect and create political representation for vulnerable selves who have a subjective, multisensorial sense of, and interest in, their own good, humans ought to let other-than-human persons plan some of their regular actions (including their (im)mobilities) and join the “mobile commons” (Sheller 2018). Emotional encounters between people cycling in nature that challenge their most fundamental assumptions about the world can help people let go of human supremacism.

I conclude by brooking a couple of confluences among my different lines of analysis. The first confluence suggests that ecology constitutes a vital source of public justification and legitimacy for cycling and ‘the good cycling society.’ However, as alluded by the ecological connection just made to human rights, any ecological good must work pragmatically in tandem with civic worth by advancing ecological goals in ways that also advance equity among humans. Exploding social inequalities undercut humanity’s capacity to deliver mobility justice (Sheller 2018), much less transform it into interspecies mobility justice. This issue of cross-pollinating common goods goes beyond multi-use pathways (shadily assembled) in wealthy Washington and the unique hurdles faced by women in incorporating nature into their everyday cycling—although these cases highlight how gentrification and complex gender inequality limit the impact of de-roading and cycling for ecological transport. The same research suggesting that experiences of awe make people more willing to step into uncertainty and challenge their basic assumptions suggests this uncertainty is more likely to inspire dread rather than expand tolerance in unequal, “vertical” societies than egalitarian, “horizontal” ones (CBC 2019). Authoritarianism and social inequities among humans undercut the positive power of floating, showing but one way in which human inequity reinforces interspecies inequality. The second confluence relates to the fact that workful play, floating and de-roading are mutually reinforcing techniques. De-roading, in particular, provides a foundation for other, ecologically good cycling practices. Ultimately, without actively infrastructuring equitable ways of cycling to (and with) nature and other life forms (in partnership with ways of walking and public transit), motor vehicles and their roads will continue to pave the way.

References


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