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INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Special Issue: Earthborn Democracy

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What hopes exist and persist for democratic and ecological flourishing in these perilous times? This special issue of *Democratic Theory* gathers thinkers from diverse perspectives to engage themes related to ecological and democratic flourishing—themes that have become increasingly urgent as democratic attempts to address the climate crisis have faltered while democracy itself appears to approach extinction. In our 2024 book, *Earthborn Democracy* (EBD), we argued that the twin crises of ecology and democracy stem from a failing cultural and political story, a story that occludes the entanglement of humans and non-humans, both the fact of interdependence and the histories of successful democratic entanglement which might inspire political action today.

The contributions collected here, both direct engagements with EBD and explorations beyond it, take up the challenge of envisioning a democratic politics born of our earthly entanglements. Seven original research articles expand and think alongside the arguments of EBD, with particular focus on myth, ecology, alternative forms of political engagement, and imagination. The symposium that follows assembles four distinguished scholars to respond to EBD and includes a response from us, the authors. The issue closes with an exclusive interview with Anne Norton, political theorist and author, most recently, of *Wild Democracy*, on the intersections of materiality, ecology, myth, and democratic politics.

As we see it, the work assembled here embodies visionary political theorizing, in two different senses of the word *vision* (Aslam, McIvor, and Schlosser 2023). On the one hand, visionary political theory names the work of accurately describing the world, identifying the exact nature of the problems we face together. On the other hand, visionary political theory also *envisions* creative responses to those problems, responses not limited to the terms or assumptions with which the problems present themselves. All the contributions here begin from a lucid assessment of the current crises, yet they also imagine alternatives that take us beyond present impasses. These essays thus illustrate Sheldon Wolin's observation that political crisis begets new modes of theorizing, when the need for re-vision reaches its peak.

EBD introduces a new mode of theorizing with its explicit turn to conscious myth-making as part of an effort to empower democratic practice and innovation.

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EBD surfaces stories of democratic cooperation beyond the conventional sites of political theorizing, looking to the deep archaeological record as well as manifold living Indigenous traditions to remind political actors and theorists today of the long history of earthly flourishing. This earthly flourishing names forms of cooperation and mutualism not restricted to anthropocentric concepts of freedom central to the modern state and to regnant understandings of democracy. We also argue that the deep history of earthly flourishing has psychic roots in the collective unconscious, which takes archetypal forms. In EBD we identify three democratic archetypes: flight, sociality, and politicality. We identify these archetypes in ongoing democratic practices across the world. These practices share ritualistic forms that in turn embody a broader myth of earthborn democracy. "Myth is lifeless without rituals" (EBD, 5), and rituals imply a mythic narrative and context that can hold and sustain aspirations for better forms of collective life.

Employing the lens of visionary political theory brings into focus how these seven research articles share contextual understandings of the world that motivate their critique. While EBD names the twin crises of ecology and democracy in general terms, these articles focus on rising authoritarian and democratic backsliding as corrosive features of the present political landscape; the failure of progressive narratives and the need to descend into darkness to overcome present impasses; and the domesticated, regulated, and antiseptic affects and practices pervasive in ordinary political life. These shared contexts motivate a critique of Enlightenment narratives, individualist and colonial logics, and the constrained practices and imaginaries of politics-as-usual.

From this shared context and critique, the seven articles diverge in their visions of alternatives. One group of articles attends affective/relational dynamics of contemporary democratic movements. Mary Witlacil critiques hopeful narratives and the future oriented visions of environmental movements, counter these with pessimism as a kind of vision without anticipation. Such a vision, Witlacil argues, can avoid cycles of disappointment and dis-fulfillment by focusing on both our collective agency and survival in the present moment. Nelems and Sanchez introduce the concept of relational democracy, drawing from living Indigenous democracies as a counter to rational, individualist logics that permeate the colonial, capitalist world order. Like Witlacil, they emphasize processes that re-root democracies in "the inherent sympoetic relationality of all that is."

Another set of papers focuses on alternative politics of new earthly practices. Max Foley-Keene develops an account of "undomesticated love" using the concepts of anthropologist Anna Tsing to name the work of collective action on the level of landscape as well as a radical political ethic that it prefigures. Foley-Keene names this ethic the "virtues of articulation" which can be enlisted by those inspired by eco-love who mobilize against the destruction of our environments. Matthew Harvey offers the experience of the "ecological sublime" as the site of new earthly practices for experiencing the uncanny and displays of agency and creativity among the human and non-human. The ecological sublime, moreover, unearths a vision of survival beyond present crises, even beyond the ending of the human species.

A third group builds on EBD's call for conscious myth-making. Romand Coles and Lia Haro examine the ancient Sumerian myth of Ianna to foster earth democracy,

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which involves "cyclical, transformative patterns of descent, decomposition, and regeneration." This myth of earth democracy, as opposed to modernity's myth of continuous progress, inspires "strategic pauses for decomposition and regeneration, practices of disruptive sanctuary, and cultivation of underworld communities." Jessica Croteau's contribution also emphasizes decomposition and decay, as necessary components to any myth of earthborn democracy. Fermentation is Croteau's example of how biological decomposition creates and transforms life, aligning with EBD's emphasis on natality but not limiting birth to the start of life. "Planetary flourishing depends on breakdown as much as birth." Paulina Ochoa Espejo explicitly names the political function of myth as what links humans and non-humans together and supports their mutual flourishing. Ochoa Espejo contrasts Robinson Crusoe's domination of territory with how Indigenous land defenders partner with the earth. These stories do not simply re-enchant the earth but create new collective heroes born of cooperation among human and non-humans.

The articles gathered here suggest new directions for democratic theory, some already underway. They challenge democratic theorists to break from the residual anthropocentrism which still shapes the background assumptions of much political inquiry. They push theorists to consider practices and rituals outside the West as well as its conventions about what counts as political or important. Perhaps above all, they illustrate the lasting power of myth and the need for democratic theorists not only to study myth but to reckon with its power as a form of political communication, orienting story, and re-enchanted worldview.

The symposium brings together respondents from authors-meets-critics sessions on EBD held at the 2024 meeting of the American Political Science Association in Philadelphia and the annual meeting of the Western Political Association held in Seattle in 2025. These contributions push us to consider perspectives not fully explored in EBD, including assumptions made about non-human animals, the dangers of romanticizing Indigenous examples, the messiness of competing cosmologies, and the proliferation of democratic experimentation and innovation toward earthly flourishing. With appreciation for these provocations, our response extends and develops our thinking about democratic myth-making and rituals of its instantiation. EBD took its cue from Sheldon Wolin's insight into the recurrent aspiration for democracy; as we develop these ideas further, we also hearken back to Wolin's intimations about democracy's need for myth and the fundamental relationship between myth and power.

Anne Norton also emphasizes democracies' need for myth. "Myth," Norton tells us, "is a more promising and dangerous category." Previously, however, myths have focused on kings and heroes; *Wild Democracy* offers new democratic myths like EBD, drawing on poetry, pirates, and non-Western stories to rewild the myths of democratic life. While Norton shares EBD's commitment to entanglement, she takes a different approach, drawing attention to entanglement as sensual and material, including the non-sovereignty of senses like smell, taste, and touch. Still, Norton identifies similarities to our theoretical approaches: a shared sense of playfulness, a capacious archive for theorizing, and a commitment to grounding our understandings of democracy in the people broadly understood, especially those often excluded from conventional accounts.

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While every moment in history feels uncertain, the present moment feels especially so. The voices collected here identify myth, processes of decay and degeneration, and cycles of earthly return and renewal as sites for visionary democratic practice; and yet this special issue makes no claim to exhaust the possibilities for democratic and ecological life. Our hope as editors and authors is that the writings here solicit the visionary political theory and transformative political action needed at this moment. As we end EBD, quoting Leonard Cohen: "Ring the bells that still can ring."

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