Democratic Theory (2026), **13**, 134–136
doi:10.1017/S2332889425000065

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Earthborn Democracy

William E. Connolly

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA
Email: pluma@jhu.edu

Morphic resonances, emergence, multiple human entanglements with other species, the earth as a series of fecund open, interdependent systems, the ineliminability, and indispensability of myth and ritual to yesterday and today—particularly when you come to terms with the visceral register of human cultures, the atrocious costs of modern denialism, the positive contributions of indigenous modes of living, interspecies alliances, breathing as one sign of human entry into nonhuman worlds (such as *photosynthesis*) that exceed it, ecologies of sustenance and care. Ali Aslam, David McIvor, and Joel Schlosser, in *Earthborn Democracy*, draw these and other themes together to show how democracy must be ecological at its core and ecology must be sustained by multifarious movements that range across many fronts. Crossings between divergent human constituencies as well as between species, aiming to transcend the hi-tech-mastery problematic that has captured modern life, in its capitalist, socialist, colonialist, and fascist manifestations.

The authors illuminate how serious things are without allowing those of us who were raised in modernist, humanist, hi-tech cultures to sink too deeply into nihilism, or cynicism, or despair before we awaken existentially and organize new morphic entanglements that draw upon multiple constituencies as they awaken latent energies and aspirations in them and us. I identify with so much in this book. I learn from it, even as I worry off and on about one or two things.

The worries? The debts to indigenous modes of culture and activism soar as the text proceeds. Sometimes I sense, though I am not sure I am correct, that when the authors object to modern mastery problematics that distress nonhuman natures and distort various modes of human entanglements, they may invoke as a counter-image the idea of an organic orientation to a harmonious nature to which human cultures can become more intimately attuned. The long-term western debate itself, though, is roughly between a mastery problematic—which has very much held the upper hand—and an organic image—which is almost always on the defensive. So to what are we to become attuned?

My instinct tells me that it may be wise to tilt things in a specific direction, a direction which draws sustenance from both pagan and indigenous cosmologies *and* rather recent turns in radical, western geology, oceanography, climatology, and glaciology.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Jean-Paul Gagnon and Mark Chou. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Euro-pagans such as Hesiod, Sophocles, Thucydides, and Ovid, for instance, painted a cosmology in which a multitude of earth processes—whether under the tutelage of gods or not—themselves go through periods of turbulence and volatility. Plagues, earthquakes, volcanoes, and climate shifts. The indigenous cosmology of the Aztecs also treated the world to go through phases, in a world in which most gods did not place human beings at the top of their concerns. The Fifth Age, the age in force when the Spanish conquistadors launched their massive invasions, would collapse in a series of massive earthquakes. It would bring down the Aztecs, though blood sacrifices pursued through the right rituals, might help the gods to delay its demise a while longer. Can we learn from such a volatile cosmology without sinking into preordained fatalism it may seem to support?

These pagan and Aztec cosmologies, to me, resonate in important ways with a radical paradigm shift late in the day in western earth sciences, though many social scientists and humanists have yet to catch up with it. The new earth scientists, resonating with Hesiod, Thucydides, Ovid, and Aztecs, define the planet to be marked by gradual evolution punctuated by shorter, self-organized periods of considerable volatility. The collision of the planet Theia with earth a few million years after the earth was formed—which created the moon; the asteroid 66 million years ago, the self-organized heating of the scorching Eemian period 130,000 years ago, the formation of The Roman Climate Optimum when Rome became an Empire, the devastating 3-year interruption of Indian monsoons at the end of the 19th century, these mark just a few of numerous planetary volatilities.

The pertinence of such self-organized, impersonal planetary shifts to today is that they expose a variety of planetary *amplifiers* that now magnify the climate effects of CO_2 and other emissions by temperate zone states, and they also act as impersonal *distributors* carrying the brunt of these effects to tropical and polar regions. An imperonal, planetary dimension of modern imperialism.

So, three cosmological myths: (1) a modern Euro-American myth of an earth susceptible to mastery and indefinite economic growth–capitalist or socialist; (2) an earth that can be brought into beneficent harmony with an eco-informed civilization, and (3) a volatile earth portrayed in some pagan-indigenous cosmologies and new earth sciences that is neither smooth in the first instance nor places human welfare at the top of its historic tendencies.

The third cosmology, I believe, illuminates the most about today and yesterday. To appreciate the grandeur of a volatile earth requires a lot of mythic/ritual work in the west to overcome the disappointments and existential resentments over failure of the first two. What we experience now in settler, temperate zone capitalist states. The eco-democracy to pursue in the light of this cosmology certainly overlaps with pursuits of *Earthborn Democracy*. But attention to volatile planetary forces may show the pace, distributional patterns, and scope of climate wreckage today to be even more severe than carriers of the first two cosmologies articulate. Whether we must, for instance, entertain cross-regional general strikes to forestall the worst wreckages. And whether it is important to engage pagan, indigenous, and new earth science planetary cosmologies as we think about how best to draw the political myths and rituals of indigenous peoples into modern life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I end this little presentation with a question, then. Is earthborn democracy set in a harmonious cosmology, one that would unfold if and when the mastery problematic were politically challenged on several fronts? Or, as it opposes mastery cosmologies, does it itself veer toward a volatile image of earth processes, including those tempestuous amplifiers and planetary distributors wheeled into motion by massive deforestation, methane releases, and CO_2 emissions?

Either way, I have learned valuable things from this superb book, and I very much appreciate the themes—some of which were noted at the outset—that its authors bring forth.

Cite this article: Connolly, William E. 2026. "Earthborn Democracy." Democratic Theory 13 (1): 134–136. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000065

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000065 Published online by Cambridge University Press