

6-2005

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## Recommended Citation

Scuro, J. (2005, June). *The Case of the Yucca Mountain and the Question of Future Generations*. Paper presented at The Globalization of Place: A Contest between Transnational Anonymity and Presence. Pace Institute for Environmental and Regional Studies (PIERS), NY, NY.

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# **The Case of the Yucca Mountain and the Question of Future Generations**

Jennifer Scuro

Paper presented at PIERS  
Pace University  
June 17, 2005

This paper will raise a question about the meaning of intergenerational responsibility, especially insofar as the world is becoming systematically uninhabitable with the unprecedented growth of a globalizing economy. As Saskia Sassen argues it, “The ascendance of information industries and the growth of a global economy, both inextricably linked, have contributed to a new geography of centrality and marginality. ... Alongside these new global and regional hierarchies of cities is a vast territory that has become increasingly peripheral” (2001, ¶¶16-18).<sup>1</sup> We have subscribed to an ethos of capital accumulation that has not only affected our interpersonal relationships, but also has corroded the ethical question of our obligation to future generations beyond economic imperatives. With Emmanuel Levinas, I will ask about not only the extent of our obligations to future generations, but to respond to the following injunction:

[To] be for a time after my time, for a future beyond the celebrated ‘being-for-death’ ... “Let the future and the most far-off things be the rule for all

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<sup>1</sup> Saskia Sassen, “The Global City: strategic site / new frontier” (2001). *Seminar*, #503. Posted online [accessed 6/16/05]: <http://www.india-seminar.com/2001/503.htm>.

the present days” – is not a banal thought ... It is a passage to the time of the other (1986, 349).<sup>2</sup>

My question would then be: What are we doing in a world, and to the earth, to which we will not return?

The proposed case of the Yucca Mountain in Nevada, as a repository for all of the nation’s nuclear waste, demonstrates the scale of our inability to address the problem of our responsibility to future generations; in fact, it is a symptom of our growing irresponsibility. The ethical question that is raised by the Yucca Mountain proposal requires a more radical character of responsibility to match the radical imposition on generations to come for the next 10,000 years. So that, although we cannot imagine them (their language, their interests) we must find a way to speak to those in generations we will not know. This is the first case in which the modern world, with its mass production and mass consumption, must consider *those who will pass in the world 10,000 years from now*.<sup>3</sup> The mountain itself will have to remain for the most part *uninhabited* because we pass it on as uninhabitable.

Annette Baier summarizes the traditional arguments within environmental ethics about the obligation to future generations. These arguments defend the demand of an ethical obligation to future generations, a defense against a no-obligation position that one might take:

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” from *Deconstruction in Context: Philosophy and Literature* (Mark C. Taylor, ed. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> There were at least two art exhibitions immediately following the proposal posing the question to artists: What kind of symbols should we use? What kind of images would prevent people so far into the future from trespassing or excavating the site? For images from one of the exhibits, see “Universal Warning Sign: Yucca Mountain,” in the *Eureka County Yucca Mountain Information Office Newsletter*, (Summer 2003), available online [accessed 6/17/05]: <http://www.yuccamountain.org/summer03.htm#art>.

[The] wrongs we can do to a future person are usually restricted to injuries [and] to interests fixed before the identity of future persons are fixed (and to such frustration and pain as is consequent upon the injury to such interests), and cannot include injury to interests not yet fixed or frustration of wants and concerns not yet fixed or hurts to sensibilities not yet fixed (1984, 234).<sup>4</sup>

She argues instead that, with respect to the content of our obligations, we owe it to future generations to limit population growth (235). Secondly, out of the imperative for distributive justice, we should limit our obligations to what can be reasonably accomplished in our time, rather than to overextend ourselves disproportionately compared to the obligations made by previous generations (236-37). Finally, she argues that my investments should always be prudent, more so now so that I will be able to sacrifice less for the sake of more distant generations. The consideration of future generations by public bodies and organizations should be greater than for the individual, and they should invest with consideration of *all future generations*, mostly out of the interest to avoid the death of “the nation they represent” (238-39).

Yet, by limiting our obligations to rational self-interest, these obligations are couched in a language which assumes a freedom before responsibility, unlike the invocations presented by Levinas’ ethical metaphysics. If we compare her arguments to the injunction put forth by Levinas, in which we are required to attend to radical alterity (other qua Other), Baier’s formulation of rationalized obligations are in fact insufficient. Baier’s arguments, defending an obligation to future generations, reflect only the imperatives that defend the interests and enjoyment of selfhood. Even Sassen questions

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<sup>4</sup> Annette Baier, “For the Sake of Future Generations” from *Earthbound*. (Tom Regan, ed. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1986 [reissued 1990], pp. 214-246).

this kind of implicit link between identity and nationalism evident in Baier's conclusions, especially since, through globalization, these newly forming claims on territory also give rise to "new notions ... of membership and entitlement" (2003, ¶56).

As Sassen suggests a politics of disadvantaged peoples not subsumable under national political discourse (¶58), I suggest a more radical, ethical critique of these new citizenships and claims to entitlement. I argue that the world has elements today that continue to be *dis-habilitating* and *uninhabitable* because of the way in which the world "works," still similar to the conditions of ethical suspension characteristic of totalitarianism, especially as it is a "faceless" violence emanating from 'everyone and no one.' Levinas defends a radical responsibility to otherness ("alterity") in his ethics and implies that there is an inherited responsibility that extends over time intergenerationally. This imperative commands me to act for a world that will be without me, so that I am infinitely responsible for a world to which I will not return.

In the wake of our growing irresponsibility toward the passing of generations, we also recognize an effacement of generations to come – to whom we seem to owe very little except the gesture of a sign not to trespass. If we think of the world we inhabit in terms of a legacy rather than as a territory, this indifference to the Other manifests not in good conscience, but rather, as a work that needs to make signs of non-welcome, the *refusal* of the Other in order to make space for the *refuse*. The ethical problem that underlies the question of space and dwelling in the world is that it cannot be sustained over generations; we are excluding generations from their place in the world, reserving space as if it were nothing, for nothing. For Levinas,

The future is the time of pro-phyesy, which is also an imperative, a moral order, herald of an inspiration. ... a future that is not a simple 'to come' [à

*venir*]. ... I think that it is the very movement to God [*à Dieu*], and that time is better than eternity which is an exasperation of the “present,” an idealization of the present (EN 115).<sup>5</sup>

The idealization of the present, given to a world project directed toward economic globalization, intrinsically misrepresents the significance of a legacy that leaves a sustained, yet intentionally uninhabitable space in the world. The question of the good conscience is a real and urgent question when we consider future generations in this context. If ethics “slips into me before freedom” (2000, 176),<sup>6</sup> as Levinas contends, have I really done all of my duty?<sup>7</sup>

While the ecologist is relegated to a language of *spatiality* and contestation over space in order to argue against nuclear power and its waste product, only by describing what makes for a sustainable practice, we may begin to see the *temporal* connotations and consequences figured into the problem of preserving a site rendered uninhabitable for at least 10,000 years. In Martin Heidegger’s early work, he argued that the spatiality of the world – its dwelling and habitation – is founded on a more primordial temporality.<sup>8</sup> While there has been some effort in environmental philosophy to introduce Heidegger’s

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<sup>5</sup> From *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*. (Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> From Levinas’ last lectures published as *God, Death and Time*. (Bettina Bergo, trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> From Phillipe Nemo’s conversation with Levinas in *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (Richard A. Cohen, ed. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985). To quote exactly, “It is the exigency of holiness. At no time can one say: I have done all my duty” (105). Following this, I must pose the idea of duty in the form of a question.

<sup>8</sup> This argument was taken from Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, trans. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1962): “[T]emporality is the condition for the possibility that dating may be spatially-local in such a way that this may be binding for everyone as a measure. Time does not first get coupled with space; but the ‘space’ which one might suppose to be coupled with it, is encountered *only on the basis of the temporality which concerns itself with time*” (1962, 470 [emphasis added]).

later ontology – incorporating his ideas of dwelling, building, thinking and even thanking, less attention has been given to his early ontology.

Therefore, extending this argument, the use of the Yucca Mountain as a nuclear repository (and posed here as an exemplary problem of sustainable practice) is not simply a question of space, *but also of time*. There is an urgency that comes with the difficulty of imagining a language which to communicate this uninhabitability of a long-term large-scale radioactive waste site.

The danger posed by inadvertent intrusion into nuclear repositories has led to efforts to stipulate a marking system that might warn future generations or civilizations of the hazards buried within. Beyond 100 years, where there will be no “active institutional controls,” “passive institutional controls” are to take over in the form of various marker systems. ... However, how can these unknown future (human) actors be enrolled in the performance of the Yucca Mountain once – as Heidegger puts it – the word has broken off? (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 2003, ¶22).<sup>9</sup>

Borrowing from the later Heidegger, Wade Sikorski demonstrates how the work of building can promote the poetic, the peaceful and the dream, and bring them into the world project. This work gathers, reveals and empowers Being and its ecological possibilities (1993, 29-32). Heidegger gives an example of the building of a bridge in which, “The bridge *gathers*” (1993, 355).<sup>10</sup> This work of building and “gathering” is not utilitarian in character, not merely a joining of two spatial locations; rather, for

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<sup>9</sup> From Brian Bloomfield and Theo Vurdubakis in “The Secret of the Yucca Mountain: Reflections on an Object in extremis.” LUMS Working Papers Series, The Department of Organization, Work and Technology. (United Kingdom: Lancaster University Management School, 2003, [<http://www.lums.co.uk/publications>]).

<sup>10</sup> From “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” in Heidegger’s *Basic Writings*. (David Farrell Krell, editor. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

Heidegger, the building of a bridge is an expression of human dwelling, revealing the power of mortals to dwell on earth. The Yucca Mountain proposal, if we see it as an ontological gathering, then we must admit that the use of nuclear power and the accumulation of nuclear waste is a practice symptomatic of a Western ecology, free of a sustainable ethical responsiveness because of the way in which we gather and build around the waste, systematically dishabilitating space in the world for others to dwell.

Heidegger's suspicion of modern technology and how it interferes with *aletheia* (disclosive power) has also been adopted into these newer problems of environmental degradation and human habitability. Sikorski describes it:

Freedom does not come by making the world conform to our prescriptions, demands and chosen imperatives, but only with a gentle release toward Being, with a meditative listening to the whisper of the world worlding as it happens at home ... we build and dwell in a way that does not destroy the earth. An-archy is the way of Being following the Turn, the way in which the thinker lets the wilderness of things be (1993, 29).<sup>11</sup>

In ecology, uninhabited space usually enters into the debate with the language of preservation or conservation, especially when the interests of human utility are at stake – the wilderness, the industrial park, the burial ground, etc. Sikorski interprets the Heideggerian meaning of dwelling as an ecological comportment, “Anticipating their death, caring for their life, building the world, mortals dwell in saving the earth, setting it free” (36). Yet, in ethics, we need to ask about these spaces in the context of time and future generations: how do we violate and suspend the imperative of ethical obligation?

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<sup>11</sup> “Building Wilderness” from *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics and the Environment*. (Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 24-43).

Not only should we ask about the sustainability and fairness of our practices, but what would it mean to ask about generosity toward future generations?

Sikorski claims that Heidegger's position, which resists both anthropocentrism and biocentrism (32), is more philosophically subtle in understanding our environmental relationship than the calculative employment of Kantian and Utilitarian theories. Yet, I argue, because of his adoption of Heidegger, there is a latent effacement given to ontology still evident in Sikorski's application. There is still a primacy for freedom over ethics in his description of existence, making Heidegger's claims on human dwelling ethically neutral, unconcerned with the issue of obligations and responsibility.

As opposed to Heidegger, Levinas argues that, "Nature is implanted in that first language which hails us only to found human language. Man must be able to listen and hear and reply" (1990, 232).<sup>12</sup> The Yucca Mountain proposal has raised a question not of our building and our thinking as Heidegger would have it, but of our capacity for receptivity and responsibility to the Other. We have not left the world in the form of a gift, nor out of generosity, rather, we render and condemn this space unredeemable out of present interests of consumption, indifferent to the generations yet to come.

The ecofeminist position regarding environmental problems is to resist all forms of patriarchal power. The height this patriarchal preference is reached with the proliferation of nuclear power, producing only for the human economy, while, for the natural economy, providing only a waste product that it cannot absorb, and not for an endless number of generations. On authority of Vandana Shiva, the traditional forms of

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<sup>12</sup> Levinas in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. (Sean Hand, trans. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

imperialism and patriarchy have found a new, more invasive, less visible form of domination with globalization and the transnational corporation:

All sustainable cultures, in their diversity, have view the earth as terra mater. The patriarchal construct of the passivity of the earth and the consequent creation of the colonial category of land as terra nullius served two purposes: it denied the existence and prior rights of the original inhabitants, and it negated the regenerative capacity and life processes of the earth (Shiva 1997, 46).<sup>13</sup>

[The] law of the return based on freedom and diversity is being replaced by the logic of return on investments. ... [which] threatens to aggravate the ecological crisis through the expansion of monocultures and monopolies (87).

The center of patriarchal power has focused the world on *production* and has prevented (if not also silenced) a system of values and practices that can recognize *reproduction*. In this way, these forms of production and practices promoted in the name of productivity neglects the question of our obligations to the generation not yet born to the world. As long as the world continues to model its spaces according to the demands of productivity, there will be accumulation of waste and less space for human and ecological viability. This marginalization of the forms of reproduction (characteristic of both feminist and sustainable practices) requires a demand to resist all forms of patriarchy, in itself not sustainable because it draws from the natural economy without retribution, without reparation, only for the sake of the human economy.

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<sup>13</sup> From *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*. (Boston: South End Press, 1997).

For Heidegger, human existence is historical in an ontological sense, *in its being*, which enables Heidegger to liberate ideas with the revelation that they too have a history. Heidegger sets the tone for interrupting the pursuit of objective knowledge against the movement of existence. That is, because ontological temporality, more primordial than spatiality, is a kind of foundational ‘physics’ for the existential movement of beings in Being, it is also primary to the formation of both world and language. This is an interpretation that influences Levinas as well as the question posed here regarding intergenerational responsibility and our obligations to future generations. So that, while freedom may be the goal of dwelling, with Levinas, *more* is asked of us.

Levinas ascribes a radical alterity to an immemorial past ‘of which I have no memory’ as the ground for the infinite character of our responsibility, prior to any claims of identity and autonomy (claims which are important to most ethical theories). More importantly, Levinas defines this alterity to include an “Other qua future” such that “The future is of he who is always yet to come, he who will never and can never fully present himself.” The other who-is-yet-to-come is not simply “the unforeseeable” (1987, 18).<sup>14</sup> In this way, the alterity of this ‘Other-that-is-not-yet’ comes with the urgent call to respond, undoing any claim to entitlements and interests centered on the present-tense, as if I were free of any obligations to the past or to the future.

If, as I am suggesting, the meaning of responsibility begins with a claim that the world is not mine, not for me, and not ultimately in terms of my ownmost existence, yet has a demand of me, what then is the *ultimate ethical possibility*? Vigilance for the other,

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*. (Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

the work of what Levinas calls ethical substitution (“the one-for-other”<sup>15</sup>), independent of all forms of economic substitution, is not one ethical possibility among possibilities; rather it is the ultimate ethical possibility. He compares this work of ethical substitution to the parent who gives the bread from their own mouth to the child.<sup>16</sup> Again I ask: *Have I done all my duty?*

The question of world habitability, later giving meaning to the language of hospitality (as the sheltering of the foreign), could not have been raised before Heidegger because he first gave importance to the disclosive power of *unheimlichkeit*.<sup>17</sup> According to Heidegger, in ontology we are required to listen to the worlding of the world, yet there is no demand to listen for what makes human and ecological sustainability vulnerable.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In the Levinasian sense, “*A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same*” (1986, 348). If, at least, ‘philosophy serves justice,’ then the thematics which predisposes all signification to a history capable of totalitarian domination must give way to the hope, the aspiration, and the reconsideration of the world-project as a whole. In what Levinas calls the “plot of goodness” in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, (Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), we might find a worldly significance for the work that welcomes ethical substitution beyond economical substitution, an ethos founded with a priority for the-one-for-the-other (1981, 138 & 165)

<sup>16</sup> More explicitly, Levinas describes it as a tearing up of *jouissance*, of enjoyment, when giving the bread out of one’s own mouth to another. “It is openness, not only of one’s own pocketbook, but the doors of one’s own home, a ‘sharing of your bread with the famished,’ a ‘welcoming of the wretched into your house’ (Isaiah 58)” (1981, 74). This is in stark comparison to his criticisms of the work of Western ontology which is of a hand that “gropes and grasps” as it consumes out of the *jouissance* of freedom and self-sufficiency. See *Difficult Freedom*, “The Virtues of Patience” in which Levinas says, “... concerning contemporary violence ... [it] is not just egoism ... The modern world has forgotten the virtues of patience. The rapid and effective motion to which everyone is committed for a single moment has furnished the dark gleam produced by the ability to wait and suffer. But the glorious deployment of energy is murderous ... The hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture” (1990, 154-155).

<sup>17</sup> This term, directly translated as the “uncanny,” has a special function in Heidegger’s ontology. *Unheimlichkeit* is a state in which the familiar, everyday world becomes suddenly unfamiliar. The disorientation of finding oneself ‘thrown out of the everyday’ also reveals our power to shape the world and shows those things in our everyday world (that may have been significant and substantial) as mere projection. The revealing power of *unheimlichkeit* is that it shows how human beings are free in their power to dwell.

<sup>18</sup> Although Sikorski’s reading seems to get this from Heidegger: “Forgetting the authority of origins and the morality of transcendent and universal truth, dwelling cultivates difference, [and] includes alterity, nurtures diversity, protects ambiguity, spares multiplicity, frees irony, and makes it possible to understand it at all as the world’s worlding” (1993, 24). So that, although the imperative to listen is in this interpretation, we face not others, but the earth itself. Specifically from Sikorski, “Seeking truth, the thinker must silence her willing, and in that silence *let the earth come forward*” (40, emphasis added).

What about the vulnerable others, rendered more vulnerable because of the way in which the world-project sustains them?<sup>19</sup> How can Levinas' idea of ethical substitution contest the direction of the world-project and resist reducing all concerns and obligations to the defense of present economic interests<sup>20</sup> and of our national or personal self-preservation? There is a responsibility that is infinitely demanded of us, interrupting our freedom to dwell. This demand trumps the work that succeeds in sending alterity to the periphery, instead requiring us to listen to and *face* (rather than *efface*) an immemorial past and a future that is not mine.

For Levinas, "In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics... [but] it is not man who possesses freedom; it is freedom that possesses man" (1969, 45).<sup>21</sup> He argues that the work of ontology is not neutral in its speculation about and interpretation of existence, but rather it is already ethically subject to what lies *beyond Being*, beyond the present tense concerns of selfhood – including self-maintenance and self-preservation.<sup>22</sup> This reversal of Heidegger's ontology emphasizes the burden of ethical

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<sup>19</sup> The present world project, especially with the use of nuclear power and its plans to house its waste product, has suspended any obligation to future generations. These generations to come will be less and less able to sustain themselves out of direct consequence of our present consumption and interests.

<sup>20</sup> Here, I do not mean just the literal economic interests, but the economic interest of all Western thinking in which all deeds require a return on investment: "The injustice through which the *I* lives in a totality is always economic" (Levinas 1998, 30)

<sup>21</sup> From Levinas' *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> As Robert Bernasconi describes it, Levinas uses this idea of "beyond" in order to "elucidate his sense of 'metaphysics,' Levinas found himself obliged to draw on the language of Western philosophy, borrowing both Plato's famous phrase from the *Republic*, the *epekeina tes ousias* or the beyond being, and the idea of infinity as found in Descartes." From "Useless Suffering" in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds. New York: Routledge, 1988, 233). Also see Levinas' *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (Translated by Alfonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998) pp. 47, 73, 103-104, especially the editor's note (nt.20): "Beyond being ... is an expression of Plato's, Republic 509b ... where it characterizes the Good." Levinas employs this reference in Plato in his metaphysics as the metaphor which is beyond ontological considerations, i.e., what is beyond Being, the Good itself.

relation as a fundamental responsibility through the face-to-face relationship. Therefore, Levinas argues that temporality is also a movement that is ethical, not neutral, and therefore cannot render the Other through either the projection of one's own memory or imagination (most problematic in the wake of the Yucca Mountain proposal because our responsibility to future generations cannot properly be derived by either way).<sup>23</sup> Levinas rejects Heidegger's idea that the world is a *project* of human disclosure and possibility, as a dwelling built to house the care and concerns of human beings out of a fundamental existential freedom. Rather, for Levinas, the world becomes habitable and human if we are vigilant to alterity, engaging a face-to-face relation with others. The self must first be a *sub-jectum* – the undergoing [*conatus*] of the one by the Other.<sup>24</sup> In the same way that Heidegger describes dwelling, which perpetuates a form of desire that seeks to be free of human intersubjectivity, so too is the work that feeds a globalizing economy. It manifests the latent desire of the subject to evade responsibility to the face of the Other, turning away the face of another that calls me by name.<sup>25</sup> The idea of ethical substitution, Levinas' demand of "one for the other," in which carrying a responsibility for the mortality of others becomes the greatest task for me – so great that it is a debt that is also uniquely all mine – becomes the frame for a temporality that is not ontological, for "precisely no one may replace me" (Levinas 2000, 193).

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<sup>23</sup> The statement, "You cannot imagine" said by the survivors of the Holocaust is taken not as rhetorical but as an implicit ethical injunction. See the specific discussion by Raul Hilberg in "I Was Not There" from *Writing and the Holocaust* (Berel Lang, ed. NY: Holmes and Meier, 1988) pp. 17-25.

<sup>24</sup> Levinas uses the terms *conatus* for "the passivity of the unintentional" in which "morality is an inalienable right of the conatus" (1998, 130). The *diaconate* is an idea to signify the work of trace, (see "Trace of the Other," 1986, 352-354).

<sup>25</sup> Levinas connects the anxiety and nausea of Western thinking to shame – of nakedness, of mortality. "The 'imperfection' of being does not appear as identical to its limitation. Being is 'imperfect' inasmuch as it is being, and not inasmuch as it is finite. If, by the finitude of a being, we understand the fact that it is a burden to itself and that it aspires to escape, then the notion of finite being is a tautology. Being is thus essentially finite." From Levinas, *On Escape*, (Bettina Bergo, trans. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) pp. 63-65, 69.

Within every exercise of individualism directed toward economic freedom and productivity, not only are there political and ecological consequences, but there continues to be a real-world extermination of the world as site of welcoming, as open to radical alterity (an obligation that can neither be dismissed nor evaded), as a legacy containing real generosity to future generations.

So how can we find a home within the world through which we are passing – a world to which we will not return – and yet make it a welcome to the Other?

The ethical relationship, in which the self must face another *as Other*, is a state of *intimate* interrogation. There is no neutrality in the relationship with another who is not like me, but beyond me and greater than me and to whom I must answer. The demand that Levinas makes is that the relation between the self and the Other is an asymmetrical, non-economic relation. This obligation does not contain a promise of a return on the investment, nor does it conform to logic that equates the interests of the self with the concern for the other.

It is an intimate subjection which also establishes the meaning of Home; the home is a place in which I can offer something to the other out of generosity. For Levinas, within the intimate sphere is selfhood is already the primordial, face-to-face relation with another, and the experience of selfhood already contains a self in subjection to otherness. Unlike Heidegger's ontology, selfhood is not established in an individuated, existential projection. Levinas argues that, "*Recollection* and *representation* are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* or a Home. ... It is produced in the gentleness [*douceur*] or the warmth of intimacy ... a delightful 'lapse' in the ontological order" (1969, 150). From the home, we can then welcome an ethical relationship to what is

foreign.<sup>26</sup> This is the Home which makes possible a gentle welcome for the Other, an offering to those who have passed as well as those others who are yet to come, belonging to a time immemorial.

Levinas places the value of the *logo-centric*, as it is given to the everyday world, is posterior to the *ethical center* of an intimate self/other relation. As an intimate relation, it cannot be subsumed into the world by light and sight (the metaphors of objective disclosure and discovery), and therefore, demands a unique work for its sustainability. “Transcendence is not an optics, but the first ethical gesture” (Levinas 1969, 174). Levinas argues in defense of human vulnerability with the work of transcendence through generosity: “This sensibility has meaning only as a ‘taking care of the other’s need,’ of his misfortunes and his faults, that is, as a giving” (1981, 74). This is a position least familiar to the modern world mechanism.

Even with the experience of intimate familiarity of a habitable world, there is an exteriority of the other within the interiority of the home that needs to be accounted for and yet, it is most often neglected. Since the home “makes labor and property possible,”<sup>27</sup> the accomplished familiarity of a modernized, mechanized world is still a leveling of the other by the same, retaining the fundamental indifference to and impatience for those who pass. “Groping, the work of the hand par excellence ... Groping reveals the position of the body ... always invited to traverse a distance at

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<sup>26</sup> It has been a mistake in thinking if we assume the gentleness of the home has no contribution to the making of history and to the meaning of time, especially if it is to be sustainable and intergenerational. As Levinas argues it, “The dimension of intimacy, not the dimension of loftiness, is opened up by woman” (1990, 37). Following Levinas, I am also extending the intimacy of the demand for ethical, non-economic substitution to the neighbor.

<sup>27</sup> For Levinas, the modern bourgeois “admits no inner division ... His instinct for possession is an instinct for integration and his imperialism is a search for security” (2003, 50). Levinas attributes this imperialism to the abandonment of transcendence, in which the world does not offer itself to the other.

random, and maintains this position all by itself. Such is the position of a separated being” (1969, 167-168).

There is a fundamental impatience for the passing of time imbedded in Western ontology and this impatience has become our legacy for future generations in both our words and our deeds. Literally, because we cannot “see” future generations, nor project them properly through our imagination, we claim no responsibility. It is as if what is other is not worth our attention. As we consider this traditional, violent attitude toward alterity – either as it serves or feeds the selfsame in utility or as it murders and exterminates the responsibility to the face of another – we understand it as a gesture of grasping and groping that limits itself to the work of preserving freedom against responsibility.

To distinguish the present, political obligations from the ethical demand of intergenerational responsibility, it is simply not enough to designate hypothetical territories or “make space” for future generations. This ethical imperative, rather, as is argued here, *requires time*. The globalizing economy, as it marks territories, is modeled after what Levinas describes as a fundamental *impatience* for the passing of time and the possibility of a world without me. Simply stated, we do not ‘find the time’ for the vulnerability of human finitude. This world has been shaped by a hand that gropes and grasps, eager to consume out of concern only for the present tense.

Sincere attention for what is other than present, ethical vigilance as the utmost ethical possibility, has become more and more impossible – to the extent that *no one is listening* to the other, for the sake of the Other. In the work of shaping the modern world, sedimentary symbols and interpretations respond economically to what really

should remain ethical in meaning. This is a demand that includes a responsibility to account for a world legacy that has the power to destroy and dismember our ecological responsibilities as well as the habitability of a world that generations other than our own will have to bear.

In the modern world, we have unhooked and uprooted any thoughtful, considerate response to otherness out of the desire for maintaining the economic and self-oriented interests devoid of genuine ethical contestation. In this way, the workings of the modern world continue to act with an indifference to the responsibility contained within the passing of time. Our argument for intergenerational responsibility must limit the freedom to dwell,<sup>28</sup> especially to the degree in which it is violent and inhuman and to the degree in which this violence and inhumanity may be inherited and extended over time as our legacy. The homicidal tendencies of history have become a form of habitation that destroys and levels the responsibility of the face-to-face and the work of ethical substitution. Because we must renegotiate the significance of ‘dwelling’ as Heidegger has described it, we are required to approach this as the ethical gesture of the *welcoming*

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<sup>28</sup> Here, I am specifically referring to Heidegger’s later work on dwelling. The idea of ‘dwelling’ is currently being developed by environmental philosophy. “The *proper plight of dwelling* does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The proper plight of dwelling is indeed older than world wars and their destruction, older also than the increase in the earth’s population and the condition of industrial workers. The proper dwelling lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that *they must ever learn to dwell*” (Heidegger 1993, 363). I would argue that further consideration should be given to the environmental applications of Levinas’ ethical metaphysics.

*home* and of hospitality in *sheltering the foreign*. We are capable of neither as we grow interested in the idea of building a nuclear waste repository at the Yucca Mountain.

It has been argued here that the project of world-space translates politically but not necessarily ethically. Temporality after Heidegger becomes fundamental to understanding the meaning of Being in the world and the legacy of an earth shaped by modern hands. With the critique of Levinas, Heideggerian temporality is fundamental yet it must be conditioned by the ethical. With this qualification, we see the problem of the Yucca Mountain come to bear. This particular problem of housing the waste accumulated from an already unsustainable practice only highlights that, when it comes to the question of environmental responsibility, the question of future generations is a grosser problem of our relationship with the passing of time than simply that of marking territory and making space. The future meaning of ecology may require a continued investigation not only into preserving and conserving places but also an interrogation into our position in time (a passing through the world to which I will not return) as a defense for our responsibility rather than our freedom in relation to other generations yet to inhabit the world as such. The greater our power becomes to affect future generations, the more we must then admit that we are responsible to them.

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