Forests and Giants

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I remember my dissertation supervisor once asked me what I thought the oldest of the old growth species was in a forest. I assumed — correctly — that I would not know the answer. Knowing my supervisor, the answer would be opposite to what most people would guess. After giving it some thought, I looked up to the canopy and said, 'the only thing I can think of is the white pine. After all, the pine is the tallest of the trees and few others can compete for the duration of decades and centuries required to reach its height.' My supervisor smiled and shook his head, and told me to look closer to the ground where the strawberry plants and blueberry patches grow. 'These plants,' he said, 'are among the first to seed the ground after a fire goes through a forest, and they help prepare the soil for the giants that will follow.'

Forests have become an integral, if not a foundational locus, for spiritual development and renewal. The twinning of ecology and spirituality, at least in the west, is much younger than in Indigenous cultural traditions, whose knowledge systems are built on generations of ecological experience, reasoning, and response. The western renewal, not surprisingly, took hold of British and American sensibilities at the same time as industrialism and agricultural capitalism were the defining features of western ascendancy. "In Wildness is the preservation of the World," noted Henry David Thoreau.[36] Yet, for Thoreau, this preservation was also rooted in the physically intertwined sustainability of humans and the natural world.

The practical aspects of this connection are clearer in Thoreau's *Walden,* in which he looks upwards to the canopy, traditionally the place of giants:

> Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heaven's above?—for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground, and are not treated

[36] Thoreau, H.D. "Walking,"The Works of Thoreau ed. Canby, H.S. (Boston, Massachusetts, Houghton Mifflin, 1937): 672, quoted in Cronon, W., "The Trouble With Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," Environmental History, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan 1996): 7-28.

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> like the humbler esculents, which, though they may be biennials, are cultivated only till they have perfected their root, and often cut at the top for this purpose.[37]

Throeau's utility and spiritual aspiration of turning to the woods, and nature more broadly, would be echoed and sustained generations later by Aldo Leopold, Lynn White Jr., and Rachel Carson. Each author gave credit to the west for the great existential alienation that embodies the western spirit, a thesis explored at great length in Frederick Turner's *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness*. Turner's critique is a shot across the bow directed straight at the rise of Christian agrarian, technological, and colonial cultures. The premise focuses on forests as places of darkness, while human dwellings, temples and cities are places of light. This binary of light and dark is ubiquitous in doctrine, art, and socio-cultural institutions.

The study of religion and ecology is not so myopic, however. As Christian theologian Willis Jenkins notes, the critiques of Christian influence on ecological degradation has influenced a re-alignment of modern Christian environmental ethics.[38] Jenkins notes, "Both nature and humanity "concreate," making composites out of form and matter, and both presuppose in their making the creation of God."[39] This dual and ongoing creation does not abstract humanity from the environment, but rather implicates us and our decisions to be either stewards or antagonists to God's creations. Here, forests can be seen more as aspects of utility through which humanity has an obligation to recognize their vital role in sustaining civilization. If people see god in the forest, then they will have more reason not to destroy the forest. This relationship is fraught, however, and has been since long before the founding and rise of Christianity. The Christian critique applies to most of antiquity's founding institutions in which the relationship between humanity and nature is framed through trauma and alienation.[40]

The focus of forests as both positive and negative sublime archetypes has direct implications on how forests are treated, as William Cronon follows the scholarly path laid by Lynn White Jr., and looks back to the Christian roots of this alienation, he explains:

> As late as the eighteenth century, the common usage of the word "wilderness" in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far

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[37] Thoreau, H.D. *Walden, An Annotated Edition*, ed. Harding, W. (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, New York, 1995): 13.

[38] Jenkins, W. "After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems," The Journal of Religious Ethics, Jun., 2009, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Jun., 2009): 288.

[39] Jenkins, W. "Biodiversity and Salvation: Thomistic Roots for Environmental Ethics," *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (Jul 2003): 419.

[40] Harrison, R.P. *Forests: In the Shadow of Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, 1992.

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> different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be "deserted," "savage," "desolate," "barren,"—in short, a "waste," the word's nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was "bewilderment" or terror.[41]

There is an explicit structural binary at work with our current and contrasting perceptions of forests as the "other." Forests are cherished as sublime places of quiet reflection, or they are alienated as dangerous places. No such distinction occurs within a dominant capitalist milieu, however, as forests are resources meant for extraction and commodification and consumption. This latter perspective is the setting in which forests largely function — chiefly as a resource site meant to sustain our current level of comfortability. Yet, it is to the fraught liminal spaces between the structural binary that this paper directs it's focuses, and how both the alienation and acceptance of the forest can be experienced simultaneously on a spiritual level.

This experience can best summed up through emerging literature that expresses the personhood[42] of forests. The direct and subtle communication trees have with each other is by no means limited to trees themselves. In a broader ecological sense, their communicative abilities extend to all manner of species that comprise individual and collective strands within their web. This web also includes us as we vacillate between our own cultural and psychological acceptance and rejection of the woods.

In this current exercise, the forest as a muse is explored as I wrote a series of fantasy novels about giants, with the forest as a constant literal and literary presence throughout the writing process. Yet, even as I write about *writing* with the forest as the muse in my work, I am reminded of words shared by my PhD Supervisor, Joe Sheridan and Roronhiakewan Dan Longboat, who wrote of the current state of perception of nature in the west,

> As the project of ignoring the legitimacy of what is turned into the ambitions of what next, the ethics of what should be became so eroded old-growth forests were felled to print stimulants for the imagination. Without everything to think with and through, imagination thinks only of itself and neglects the salmon's mythological lesson of the journey to become grizzly, mountain rain, and finally, Douglas Fir.[43]

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[41] Cronon: 8.

[42] Wohlleben, P. The Hidden Life of Trees, (Greystone Books, Vancouver / Berkeley, 2016).

[43] Sheridan, J and Roronhiakewen "He Clears the Sky" Dan Longboat," "The Haudenosaunee Imagination and the Ecology of the Sacred," *Space and Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 4, November 2006: 372.

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The point should not be lost here that this is a reflection on what the forest communicates to *me*, which then becomes words written on the page. Orality and performance of encounter is missing here, replaced instead by the same economic practices that transform the personhood of trees into the paper that words are written on. In Sheridan and Longboat's study of Indigenous imagination and sacred ecology, this level of encounter becomes a synthesized experience where imagination becomes removed from *actually* being in the woods.

The experience is therefore mine alone, just as it is *yours* alone. What is left are echoes on the page for readers. These echoes are nonetheless significant, or as one beta reader of my stories suggested, writing about giants is ultimately an exploration of "the giant within." The giant within, in this case, is both psychological and eco-phenomenal. The exploration is one that is 'betwixt and between' the western cultural structures that situate trees and forests as non-sentient resources, and giants as fiction.

In Indigenous storytelling traditions, there is no such distinction between fact and fiction, as the area between both is where truth moves. Consider for a moment the Ojibwe painter Norval Mourisseau. When he wrote about his inspiration for the prolific Woodland art he produced in *Return to the House of Invention*, he wrote about his inspiration as having come through several visits with higher beings in the astral plane. "When I wake up in the morning, I don't remember going anywhere. I go about out here until I get my canvas and grub, essentials. Now the soul reflects the mind, and the mind reflects the body and the body stays here."[44]

Mourrisseau takes a departure from the foundation of western consensus reality[45] in such a way that it never existed for him to begin with. Similarly, Ojibwa Elder and scholar James Dumont notes: "This reality that we experience (perhaps most readily in dreams) is constantly intersecting with what we know as everyday reality. We are most aware of it when we are not so intensely focussed in everyday reality. The levels of reality *are* concurrent and have equal credibility. They provide "true" experiences to which we must respond."[46]

While prevalent in Indigenous cultures where imagination and place are concomitant, such an animist perspective is also apparent among folks who follow an indeterminate path in the west. In his introduction to *Greening the Paranormal*, British

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[44] Mourrisseau, N. *Return to the House of Invention*. Key Porter Books Ltd.., 1995: 13.

[45] Hunter, J. "Ontological Flooding and Continuing Bonds." Continuing Bonds in Bereavement: New Directions for Research and Practice, edited by Dennis Klass & Edith Maria Steffen (London: Routledge, 2017): 191-200.

[46] Dumont, J. "Journey to Daylight Land: Through Ojibwa Eyes," *Laurentian University Review,* Vol. 8, No. 2, 1976.

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author and environmentalist Paul Devereux writes about his encounter with a two to three foot tall green person in the Irish countryside who looked, "[as] if composed of a tight, dense tangle of foliage."[47] A deeply unsettling reality was presented to Devereux in which he was an unwitting participant. The reality discussed by Devereux echoes my current journey writing about giants. The giants, being an exploration of the "giant within," is also an exploration of the giant without. This is the giant who looks through the window into the house with its dark foliage eyes. On returning the gaze, a relationship is formed in the space between everyday reality and wonder.

Forests and Muse

> "You still have that blindfold on," Alfios said as they ate rations by the lean-to. "I do," Tholas said. "I am training my mind to hold onto an image, and it is hard to do if my eyes are always full of everything around me."

This is a brief exchange of dialogue in my fifth unpublished fantasy manuscript, titled *Gigantomachia*, or "war among the gods" in Latin. The discussion is between a dwarf — in the fantastical sense — and a common human as they navigate a subterranean tunnel network. This section is unique because it was written after I had fallen asleep, with the soft glow of the computer on my fingers and face, and the forest looking in from outside my office window. Tholas, as the reader comes to know, is a common human with a giant residing in his consciousness.

The process of writing this series, which at the time of this reflection is in excess of 800,000 words, has been one in which routine, place, and state of consciousness are interwoven. The routine is simple enough: write a minimum of 1,000 words each night, forget about what was just written and move on. Place and state of consciousness are considerably more complex, however, and form the basis of this paper.

In 2016, my family packed up our house in Southwestern Ontario and relocated to Northern Ontario. The flat farmland with pockets of Carolinian forest I had been imprinted by were replaced with hilly boreal forest and broad expanses of lake. The landmass of Northern Ontario is much larger than its southern counterpart, which has a population of nearly 13 million people. By contrast, Northern Ontario has fewer than 800,000 people. We moved to the city of North Bay, a city with 55,000 citizens. The place, therefore, invites greater uninterrupted exploration of the boreal terrain.

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[47] Devereux, P. Foreword to *Greening the Paranormal: Exploring the Ecology of Extraordinary Experience* ed. Hunter, J. August Night Press, 2019.

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Looking out from my office window I see a wooded wildlife corridor connecting Algonquin Park — a park as large as the State of Delaware — to the rest of Northern Ontario. A constant flow of animal traffic moves through this narrow passage. The most common interlopers are the resident whitetail deer population, followed by all manner of other species of migratory birds, and snowshoe hare. A few kilometres out of town it is reasonable to expect visits from bear, wolves, and moose.

There is little wonder how the northern landscape forged its way into my writing process. The place has had an endearing and enigmatic presence in my writing, to the extent that I find myself writing the story while I am asleep, with the laptop propped open. The trees just beyond my window look in as I, like the character Tholas, train my mind to hold onto an image with my eyes closed.

This experience is communicated by the presence of white pine, cedar, maple, birch, balsam, and jack pine. Their occupation of my fingers is foundational to my writing exercise, and they offer a response to an observation posed by the eco-phenomenologist David Abrams, who said:

> Walking in a forest, we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us — we feel ourselves exposed, watched, observed from all sides. If we dwell in this forest for many months, or years, then our experience may shift yet again — we may come to feel that we are a part of this forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself.[48]

Yet this encounter is not always sanguin, as the presence and function of simulacra can unsettle our comfortably modern lives (See image 1). I often think the forest is not only seeing me, but it is also speaking through me. Further, the words expressed through me navigate the betwixt and between of our sylvan assumptions. The outer forests — much like the inner forests of our minds — are places that invite the interplay of darkness and light, producing the simulacra of shadows that can either haunt or entice our sensibilities.

[48] Abrams, D. *Spell of the Sensuous, Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, 1996, Vintage Books, New York: 66.

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Image 1: Simulacra in dense undergrowth.
Faces and body-like shadow figures appear in nature.

This writing process represents itself in many ways, but the dominant voice that writes through me is that of the giant. The series of manuscripts written through me centres on the world of giants as they encounter the common humans who overran their lands. In turn this process has triggered a reflection and reevaluation of myself as an instrument of wonder. Here, the simulacra is an authoritative but wavering voice that merely requires fingers to do the heavy work. A sleepy self is open to the wanderings of giants as they come to terms with common humans in their lands.

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Interestingly, it is to giants and all other manner of frightful forest creatures that we get our cue of western civilization's fraught relationship with the woods. This history predates Christian culture, but its roots thread their way into our present relationship with the woods. How giants figure as antagonists is peculiar to me, as their roles are reversed in *Nation of Giants*, my first manuscript, in which they are the protagonists.

Gazing to the Shadows of Civilization

> It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude.[49]

There is a scene in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," in which the journey through the deep dark woods places the protagonist against Western civilization's greatest foe. The enemy, as we come to learn, is the devil, the inquisitor of wonder and arbiter of blind faith. All of this occurs in the thick Massachusetts' forests in the dead of night and this is no subtle afterthought. The woods, particularly in puritan New England, were the be-wildering place beyond the mind's appropriations.[50]

There is no mistaking what happens in the woods as the project of modernity was slowly wrestling itself free from blind religious experience and the type of faith that tortured witches in nearby Salem. The devil's place in the woods is well suited to Hawthorne's sensibilities, even if the persecution of witches occurred in the supposedly civilized setting of a New England town. The woods is where civilized law is anathema to the order of the cities, but as we will see there is a natural transformation of civilization back into the wilderness of the woods. Robert Pogue Harrisson notes in *Forests: In the Shadows of Civilization,* "Why does the law of civilization define itself from the outset over against the forests?"[51] This transformation is steadfastly resisted by Young Goodman Brown as he walks through the woods at night, ultimately turning his back on the devil and re-entering civilization.

Interestingly, this near exact same scene plays out in a little-known story called "The Baldoon Mystery,"[52] which also happens to be the founding story of my hometown

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[49] Hawthorne, N. "Young Goodman Brown," 1846.

[50] McKay, D. *De-Activateed West 100*, Gaspereau Press, 2005.

[51] Harrison.

[52] McDonald, N.T. *The Baldoon Mystery*. Edited by Alan Mann, Wallaceburg: Standard Press, 1986.

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in Southwestern Ontario. In the "Baldoon Mystery," the walk through the forest at night is mirrored by the plot of "Young Goodman Brown," with one key difference. The protagonist John McDonald's terror filled forest walk is countered through the loud singing of hymns and reliance on the faith that brought the protagonist to this juncture in the first place. The counterpoint in both stories occurs at both ends of a spectrum. On one end, logic and rationalism are the path through the allegorical forest. The other way through is followed by faith and religious tradition. Regardless of what path is taken, the forest spirits are pushed back.

The key difference between "Young Goodman Brown" and the "Baldoon Mystery" is the former's designation as fiction, and the historical basis of the latter. From 1829 to 1831, the McDonald family and their surrounding neighbours were beset by a series of inexplicable maladies. The events surrounding the mystery are considered Canada's most well-documented poltergeist, and while the veracity of the events are not the focus of this reflection, the elements of psychic and social upheaval are pertinent. The popularized account, as told by John McDonald's son, Neil T. McDonald, has a continual thread of oblivion running throughout the story.

There are elements of domesticity and wildness in constant competition throughout the story. McDonald makes note of his father's forbearance with particular attention to the role of the house and family life during such upheaval:

> Worn out with anxious watching, the unhappy man was becoming desperate, when flames burst from a dozen sources in his dwelling. No time to save his household goods; the fire razed his habitation to the ground. Not even his coat was saved, and he saw the home to which he so lately led his happy bride, buoyant with future hope, strewed to the ashes in wind.[53]

The forest in both stories is oblivion.

It is with critical awareness of this structuralist approach that I have looked out into the woods and wondered why all the fuss with oblivion when such a space can also inspire wonder?

I have been opened to another sense of forest.

In this other sense, the unseen multitude bears less resemblance to the devil and has more in common with the trickster.

This sense first arose when, in the summer of 2016, I looked out into the woods near Trout Lake, and I could see distinct faces looking back from the boughs of cedar, maple, white pine, jack pine, and tamarack. Rather than face me as static

[53] McDonald: 13.

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representations, the simulacra were full of exaggerated expressions that spoke and often laughed with the breeze that moved through them.

Was this the oblivion encountered by Young Goodman Brown and John McDonald? Or was it something else entirely?

Rather than assign meaning to my encounters with faces in the trees, I took a more agnostic and critical approach. I treated the faces as a naturalist might treat such experiences. My initial concern was if I put a name to it, the encounter would be fleeting because I engage with the phenomena on terms shaped by my *own* cognition. This state of cognition is shaped by the comforts of the home through which I witness the faces in the trees, and it is expressed decidedly in English, and knowledge of its presence — however incorrect — is done through the purely monophasic conscious[54] state of alertness.

My interest, instead, was in *not* naming it, but watching how the trickery in the trees played out. In keeping with the naturalist approach, I turned to literature as a cue for how culture — in particular the Western culture I come from — expresses such encounters.

Like Young Goodman Brown and John McDonald, my first nights in Northern Ontario inspired an element of terror. During a particularly intense thunderstorm, I awoke one night to what I thought was the sound of someone shrieking for help in the woods.

As a professor, I have had students who will push to see if I will back away. Several students in the programs I have taught come into the classroom with experiences rooted in trauma, and they come to speak about resilience. So who am I as a person of privilege wanting to share in this discussion? A stand-offish demeanour is a clever mask for one who wants to test the limits of trust. If I flinch, or if I enact a patriarchal power position, the student will likely not return. If I face the student, however, and acknowledge them with gratitude and honesty for being fellow human beings, they are more than likely to develop a relationship of trust.

I did not flinch when I looked into the woods at the faces staring back, or when I lay in bed during the thunderstorm at night.

The darkness of the forest is there, but it is a mystery defying rationality that speaks through inversion.

So, knowing these faces mime and these voices speak, I left little offerings of Semaa, or tobacco, in the woods. This practice is something my Anishinaabe-kwe (Ojibwe) wife, myself, and daughters have been practicing as a means of carrying our words to the Creator, and sharing respectfully with the beings in the woods so that they

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[54] Lumpkin, T. "Perceptual Diversity, Is Polyphasic Consciousness Necessary for Global Survival?" Anthropology of Consciousness, 12, (1-2) 37 - 70, 2001.

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might do the same thing.

Yet the trickster is still present in the woods. The presence of a large dark figure could be a bear, or it could be the blackened earth of a fallen tree's root system. This is the mess of encounter in a forest where agency is on full and myriad display. The trickster can cause laughter, especially if the fright turns out to be the vertical root system. But the trick can also be true to terror, especially if the form turns out to be a bear.

Fortunately I have only seen walls of tree roots.

Giants as Muse

> From the forests where the urn is placed a plough stands forth, signifying that the fathers of the first peoples were the first strong men of history.[55]

I owe a debt of gratitude to the classicist Robert Pogue Harrison. As I started reflecting on forests and giants in my writing process, I rediscovered his book *Forests: In the Shadows of Civilization.* This historical analysis of forests and western civilization begins with a wonderful exploration of giants and their role as the "fathers of first men."

Harrison offers a careful analysis of the seventeenth century Neapolitan theorist Giambattista Vico and his work *New Science*. Vico offers what Harrison calls a "Genetic Psychology" of western civilization by re-examining the cultural roots of Christian epistemology. Although Vico's historical methodology can be relegated as fantastical, its role in expressing contemporary alienation from nature is of paramount importance. In *New Science*, Vico offers the following definition of giants: "By long residence and burial of their dead they came to found and divide the first dominions of the earth, whose lords were called giants, a Greek word meaning 'children of the earth,' i.e. descendants of those who have been buried."[56]

The ancestors to Greek and Roman civilizations, giants were the descendants of Noah who were abandoned by their mothers:

> […] they grew up without families or consciousness, feeding on fruits and searching for water. They were shy, brutal, restless, incestuous, and lacked any notion of a higher law than their own instincts and desires. They copulated on sight, aggressively and shamelessly, exercising no restraint whatsoever over their bodily motions, and they roamed the forests incessantly.[57]

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[55] Vico, G *The New Science*, 1725.

[56] Vico.

[57] Harrison.

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This, Vico notes, represented a freedom from terror and authority, a freedom from fathers. Descendants of giants recognized a path towards civilization and the laws of man and God. This path mirrors the linear ascendancy in which history is generally seen as a brutal period from which enlightenment can grow. Here, the metaphorical tree replaces the literal tree, and the subterranean roots are no different to the sub-liminal roots. In this axiology, primal urges are suppressed as immoral and unlawful actions. This is similar to Descartes' comparison of history and fables to visiting foreign countries, "when too much time is occupied in traveling, we become strangers to our native country; and the over curious in the customs of the past are generally ignorant of those of the present."[58] The past is anathema to enlightenment, often seen as a darkened place from which we must transcend towards the light.

This same trope was used by many European enlightenment thinkers as both disparaging and romantic notions that were equally and incorrectly applied to Indigenous peoples in North American. They were either seen as red in tooth and claw, or they were noble citizens of the forest wandering aimlessly here and there.

The giants of history are comparable to the stereotypes cast onto Indigenous peoples by many Europeans who encountered something new. Yet the dominant colonial frame of reference was more in line with the giants of Noah's time, the antecedents of Greek and Roman civilization.

Interestingly, the giants in Vico's analysis cannot see the sky through the forest around and over their heads. As I think about this visually, I wonder in what forests were these giants standing in that they could not see the stars above? Vico notes that when giants first look up to the sky they see their god, Jove, "who by the whistling of his bolts and the noise of his thunder was attempting to tell them something."[59] This is a telling moment for Harrison and the connection he makes between the forest and oblivion.

> What did they see?
>
> Harrison asks this question, and offers the following transformative response:
>
> "They saw nothing: a sudden illumination of nothingness… or at least nothing definite, they had to 'picture the sky to themselves' in the aspect of a huge animated body: a body not seen but imagined as there beyond the treetops."[60]

Like the giants of antiquity, the character Tholas in *Gigantomachia* will not take off his

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[58] Descartes, R. *Discourse on Method*, 1637.

[59] Vico.

[60] Harrison.

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blindfold because his mind is trying to hold onto an image, but this is hard for him to do if his eyes are open and "full of everything." Tholas, in the story, has a giant inside him, an event that occurred when the two physically met and looked into each other's eyes. Vedi, the giant who occupies Tholas's consciousness, is known in the story as the King of Limbs. Vedi is a reclusive character who is forced into the wilderness by other giants who wish for a true leader to confront the common humans. So it is into the mind of a common human that Vedi speaks clearest and can interact physically with the world around Tholas.

The giants, Harrison says, "produce an image in the empty space of their minds — a space as empty and abysmal as the sky itself."[61] Yet, this emptiness demands further consideration. The absence of something inspires the terror of oblivion, especially when the world itself is a simulacra, as in the forest at night. Alternately, such an effect can come from looking at water if the conditions of light and shadow are right. Vedi the giant recalls a near-fatal accident from his youth when he looked down at the outline of his shadow on the water. As the sun shone down from above Vedi, his reflection was not present. Light radiated out from the shadow head under these conditions, but it was to the dark space between that Vedi looked, as this was where the whale he hunted would be seen. The poet Robert Bringhurst made a similar observation of Narcissus in his poem "Death by Water"[62] when he wrote:

> It was not his face nor any
> other face Narcissus saw
> in the water. It was the absence there
> of faces. It was the deep clear
> of the blue pool he kept on coming
> back to, and kept on coming
> back to him as he went to it…

The image shifts away from Narcissus's obsession with his reflection and to the absence of his image. We might consider this moment of quiet gazing by giants and Narcissus as a prelude to wonder. For Vico, the gaze and response is the precursor to enlightenment. In the resounding quiet there is a noise that propels humanity to distance itself from the source of that sound. Harrison says this is the moment when giants turned their backs on

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[61] Harrison.

[62] Bringhurst, R. "Death by Water," in *The News and Weather: Seven Canadian Poets: Robert Bringhurst, Margaret Avison, Terry Humby, Brent MacKay, Guy Birchard, A.F. Moritz, Alexander Hutchison*, edited by August Kleinzahler, Brick Books, 1982.

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the forests and turned their attention to the sky, "from the moment the giants took cognizance of Jove's divine authority, the forests could no longer contain their consciousness, for the latter originated in its submission to something external — to a father who communicated by means of celestial signs."[63]

Image 2: Button Wood Tree, 18 ft. In circumference, in the bush near Chatham.

Again, I raise the question, what forests could prohibit a giant's view of the sky? The only forests I know that prohibit a view of the sky are forests in which competition for light pushes every tree vertically as high as they can stretch. Such a forest, or section of a forest, may have been cleared by a windstorm, from which the term "windfall" and its auspicious nature originates. Alternately, the forest could have been cleared by hand for timber, or perhaps the forest had been cleared by fire. Whatever the case, the first generation of growth can lead to the competitive conditions that prohibit the view, let alone limit the movement of people on the forest floor. Successive generations of growth,

[63] Harrison.

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done in conjunction with the movement of animals — birds, ungulates, predators — see to the maintenance of the ecosystem that precedes an old growth forest.

The characteristics of an old growth forest are remarkable, as they both allow and prohibit an understory of density to exist. An example of this is a landscape painting that was done near my hometown in Southwestern Ontario, by Lt. Philip John Bainbridge in 1840 (see image 2). The towering tree creates dominion — as the poet Wallace Stevens might say — by drawing all the wilderness up to it yet simultaneously away from it.

As in the case of the buttonwood tree (American Sycamore or *Platanus Occidentalis*), space is created through the branches where one can see the sky. The co-participation of many species allows for select trees within the forest to become giants. Whether the giant is a tree shading the undergrowth or an ancestor looking into nothingness, the presence of a celestial divinity in the West makes the forest anathema to the future. As Harrison says, "Where divinity has been identified with the sky, or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with "heaven," the forests become monstrous, for they hide the prospect of god."[64]

The entrance of Vulcan into the forests clears the way for humanity to develop critical insight. As the god of fire and metalwork, there is little wonder why this task falls to him. In order for Vulcan to observe the open sky, he had to burn the forests and create a clearing. In turn, Vulcan enlisted the cyclopean giants to build weapons which were then given to Jove to produce even greater weapons. Vico's commentary on the cyclopes is peculiar, for much like Bringhurst's questioning Narcissus's gazing at his reflection, Vico refutes the notion of cyclopes having one eye. "Every clearing was called a *lucus* in the sense of an eye, as even today we call eyes the openings through which light enters the house."[65]

Vulcan, the master craftsman, opens the eye by setting the forest ablaze, "to be able to see the direction of the lightning bolt, that is, to read the auspices. Fire itself came from this divine celestial source. Technology appropriated its uses for the purpose of deforestation. Hence technology too takes its origins from the sky."[66]

Forests: interplays of light and shadow

Seeing the world with two eyes has emerged as a theoretical and methodological framework in Indigenous Studies. Bartlett, Marshall and Marshall framed the discussion around environmental education and the importance of weaving both Western and

[64] Harrison.

[65] Vico.

[66] Harrison.

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Indigenous thought systems to produce transformative curricula.[67] Two-eyed seeing, the authors say, is a process of interweaving both western and Indigenous knowledge processes, so the former does not stifle or colonize the latter.

Cultural maintenance and the sustainability of land are fundamentally interconnected. If this is seeing with one-eye open, the desire to open another eye would not preclude the closing of the first eye. Philosopher Richard Tarnas has noted that "wisdom, like compassion, often seems to require of us that we hold multiple realities in our consciousness at once."[68] This can be considered primary vision, and it is the principle tenet held by the Anishinaabeg as they fought to maintain traditional practices while simultaneously welcoming Western knowledge systems within their territories.

Seeing the world with two-eyes instead of one allows the gifts of both Western and Indigenous ways to function together in new and dynamic ways. If Indigenous societies are considered to be viewing the world with a single albeit primary eye to the world, then the enlightenment project of the west is also limited to a single eye. This eye does not gaze on the world, but on the prospect of the transcendent self.[69]

In Vico's assessment of the cyclopes and Vulcan, he rightly points to the giants as having one eye focused on the world around them. What is missed, however, is the trade-off because Vulcan only instructs the cyclopes to open the other eye while closing the one through which they previously viewed the world. Closing one eye for the other was equal to razing their lands to feed Vulcan's furnace.

For Ojibwe Elders like Jim Dumont, Western vision is narrow in scope, "one of the two possible roads before them [humans] offered knowledge and growth through accumulation and mountain of all that could be seen."[70] The other, more arduous road, "appeared less attractive materially and quantitatively, but offered a whole and comprehensive vision that entailed not only vision before but also behind (a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree vision.)"[71]

The three-hundred-and-sixty-degree vision faces an easy critique from critical theorists as being fantastical at best, and imbecilic at worst. The critique encompasses anyone who differs from the dominant monophasic rationalist mindset. Ridicule is not reserved solely for Indigenous peoples who believe in an animate universe, but is readily directed at anyone who looks for signs in the skies or cryptids in the woods. This

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[67] Bartlett, C. Marshall, M. Marshall, A. "Two-Eyed Seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing," *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2: 331–340.

[68] Tarnas, R. *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a New World View*, Plume, 2006: 14.

[69] Tarnas: 24.

[70] Dumont: 31.

[71] Dumont: 31-32.

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judgment was similarly directed at the cyclopes, who would look to the sky above and view Jove's wonders, and then through *procurare auspicia* offer up a sacrifice to divine the meaning.

Conclusion:
Auspicia on the land, the water, and rock

In June 2018 a highway commuter and a passenger experienced a horrific event with what they described as a "sasquatch." The experiencer noted that a large bipedal figure ran across the road ahead of him. The driver of the vehicle stopped and walked into the bush to see if it was anywhere nearby. On entering the forest, he said the creature was spotted lying face down on the ground. As they neared the location, the sasquatch jumped up and started yelling and screaming until the commuters ran back to their vehicle.[72] This encounter between a commuter and "sasquatch" is remarkable for a number of reasons, the least of which is its visceral intensity. There is a peculiar play of symbology at work with this particular witness 'sighting' that resonates with the sublime forest encounters that inspired my writing. The sighting is also peculiar because of its proximity to a nearby hunt camp which I have previously written about with co-authors Christopher Laursen and Elorah Fangrad in the book *Greening the Paranormal*. The activities at the hunt camp form the basis of our research in the essay entitled "Psychic Naturalism." Although events at the camp focus on psycho-kinetic phenomena, visual and auditory apparitions, and occasional encounters with UFOs, as far as I know there have been no reported sightings of Sasquatch or Bigfoot.

The 2018 witness report remained an enigma to me for some time, until I began to understand its symbolism as enacted on the scale of traditional oral storytelling. I was giving a lecture on simulacra and hierophany as a way to understand accounts of the paranormal at a northern Ontario university, and I offered the witness account as a minor addendum to the events I had researched at the hunt camp. A Cree student from a James Bay community approached me after the class and shared that the creature I described as Bigfoot comes in all sizes, and it is a spirit helper. She then remarked how the story I shared reminded her of the Sleeping Giant, a rock formation in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Although on the other side of the province, and in Ojibwe territory, the Cree student couldn't help but think the eyewitness report was enacting a similar function to the rock formation. The Sleeping Giant is associated with Nanabozho, the Trickster in Anishinaabeg oral stories. Nanabozho is a transformative agent who takes on the guise of

[72] Dee McCullay - Dark History, https://darkhistoryblog.blogspot.com/2018/06/2-men-encounter-sasquatch-give-chase.html. Accessed 21 May 2021.

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many different animals, sometimes plants and rocks, as they fulfil patterns of function and dysfunction, creating, destroying and recreating the world.

The Sleeping Giant offers some context for reports of a shadow figure that has since appeared at the nearby hunt camp. Fangrad, one of the co-authors of "Psychic Naturalism," is a staff member at the hunt camp, and continued living there in 2019. Nearly one year after the June 2018 sighting, she reported that one of the camp guides had spotted a startling humanoid-shaped shadow on a rock. The guide photographed the shadow, which 'appeared to be small, only a bit taller than the shrubs, and of the eponymous Sasquatch silhouette. The photo was of poor quality since it was taken with a cell phone at night.'[73] Fangrad noted the figure could be seen from where she was living, and that 'From the right angle in dimming light, the erosion and moss cover of a boulder on the shore made the distinct shape, and it absolutely looked like a small Sasquatch figure standing in the brush.'

The story of the highway encounter was already the talk of the nearby town and the hunt camp. After the rock figure was known among camp staff, Fangrad reported some staff members reported having horrific dreams featuring a shadow figure. I

Image 3: Humanoid shadow in rock (2015)

[73] Elorah Fangrad, personal communication.

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suggested to Fangrad that she place tobacco in the water near the rock, to which she said she had already been doing this. Fangrad noted that the figure had not been reported prior to the highway encounter, and although it may have been there in the past, the knowledge of its presence had created a stir among the staff.

Fangrad was surprised to see the same shadow appear in the rocks in photographs she had taken in previous years (See image 3). The shadow presence was so mundane nobody noticed it prior to the 2019 camp season. The shadow took on great significance however, after the terrifying report of a commuter on a nearby highway. I cannot help but think of the connection between hierophany, simulacra, and to the concept of amplificatory interpretation, which D.W. Pasaulka explores in relation to imagination:

> […] the unconscious amplifies the associations related to an image or a group of images and creates a meaningful framework that is then associated with events or experiences. It is partly how cultural narratives are produced, and while the concept appears reductive, it is not. It admits to a real objective event; it just refrains from identifying, with certainty, what the event is. Instead, it focuses on the meaning projected upon and associated with the event.[74]

Although I never had an encounter like the ones described in and near the hunt camp, a similar process was at work with my own encounters in the northern woods. Rather than the presence of a "bigfoot," the fleeting features of simulacra faces in the woods still had the effect of hierophany and meaning production in my work. This, in turn, generated the imaginative composition of my fantasy stories.

The question of meaning making is one I return to many times over. Regardless of whether the encounter is sanguine, horrifying, or questionably mundane, the story becomes a cultural propellant, fuelling both our imaginative fears and our desires. These fears and desires simultaneously find recognizable patterns on top of existing cultural and ecological foundations. The presence of simulacra and witness accounts of other-than-human beings also find home in the imagination, which in turn re-stories their presence in the world.

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[74] D.W. Pasulka, *American Cosmic: UFOs, Religion, Technology*, Oxford University Press, 2019: 102.

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