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“Religious Experience and Ecology”

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Dr. Jack Hunter

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Editorial:
Religious Experience and Ecology

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Welcome to Vol. 7 No. 2 of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience.* This special issue is an exploration of a theme that was very close to the heart of the founder of our research centre - the relationship between ecology and religious experience. Indeed, Sir Alister Hardy (1896-1985) started his academic career as a marine ecologist, and in that field is most widely known for his contributions to the study of plankton and their many fundamental connections to other parts of marine ecosystems. Hardy is also credited with the invention of the Continuous Plankton Recorder (CPR), used for documenting plankton levels in the ocean, and his research is still the benchmark for current work in this area (Continuous Plankton Recorder Survey, 2021). Following his retirement in 1969, after a string of prestigious university posts, and in order to pursue another of his life-long fascinations, Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) at Manchester College, Oxford, and began the process of collecting, documenting and analysing contemporary reports of religious and spiritual experience. Today the archive is housed at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter campus (with the new name of 'Religious Experience Research Centre'), and contains over 6,000 first-hand accounts of religious experiences submitted by the general public (RERC, 2021).

Hardy's fascination for religious experience co-evolved with his love for, and curiosity about, the natural world. In his autobiographical notes, Hardy recalls having powerful and transformative experiences in nature during his childhood years, which would have a significant impact on the later unfurling of his life and work. He explains how as a student he would occasionally slip into reveries while observing the behaviour of butterflies, or experience moments of ecstasy when walking along the banks of the river near his school in Oundle, Nottinghamshire. He writes:

> There is no doubt that as a boy I was becoming what might be described as a nature mystic. Somehow, I felt the presence of something which was beyond and

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> yet in a way part of all the things that thrilled me - the wildflowers, and indeed the insects too. I will now record something [that] I have never told anyone before, but now that I am in my 88th year I think I can admit it. Just occasionally when I was sure that no one could see me, I became so overcome with the glory of the natural scene, that for a moment or two I fell on my knees in prayer - not prayer asking for anything, but thanking God, who felt very real to me, for the glories of his Kingdom and for allowing me to feel them. It was always by the running waterside that I did this, perhaps in front of a great foam of meadowsweet or purple loosestrife (Hardy, cited in Hay, 2013).

The philosopher and scholar of mysticism W.T. Stace (1886-1967) identified nature mysticism as one of the main forms of mystical experience more generally. He suggested, however, that these experiences be referred to as 'extrovertive' - as distinct from much more inward facing 'introvertive' experiences - because they are often triggered by, and 'transfigure,' the external physical landscape and environment, frequently inducing a sense of the underlying unity of the natural world (Stace, 1960, p. 15). The RERC archive contains numerous similar accounts of extraordinary and transcendent experiences apparently induced by immersion in vibrant ecological systems (a small sample of these accounts has been collected in Hunter, 2019b). In his pioneering study of the reports contained in the archive, *The Spiritual Nature of Man* (1979), Hardy identified 'natural beauty' as one of the most common triggers of religious experiences (p. 81), marginally more common than religious worship, clearly suggesting an important correlation between natural environments and extraordinary experiences. More recently, Paul Marshall (2005) has conducted an extensive study of the relationship between mystical experiences and the natural world. In the preface to his book on the subject, Marshall explains the value in taking a renewed look at extrovertive mystical experiences:

> Apart from their significance as life-transforming events, the experiences are of considerable theoretical interest. They have been important in the modern study of mysticism, constituting one of the major types of mystical experience recognised by scholars […] and they promise to be important in the future development of the field […] The experiences provide an important test case for evaluating explanations […] Extrovertive experience is also of interest for the stimulus it could give to the study of mind […] Are there non-sensory forms of contact with the world? Does mind exist beyond the brain? (Marshall, 2005, p. vii).

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We could also add the ecological crisis to this list of reasons for taking a renewed look at extrovertive mystical experiences. Many commentators have suggested that the current ecological crisis has its roots in the perceived disconnect between humans and our natural environment, which has emerged, especially in the Western world, over the last two hundred years (Roszak, 1993). The restoration of a sense of connection to the natural world has, therefore, been proposed as one important way of bringing about change in social and cultural attitudes and behaviours towards the environment. In a review of the research literature on what has come to be known as "connectedness to nature theory" (CNT), Restall & Conrad (2015) explain that:

> [..] a relationship with the natural world directly affects people's physical, mental, and overall wellbeing due to benefits gained by increased exposure to nature and positive experiences in the natural world […] Direct experiences with natural settings seem to have very profound emotional effects on people […] and a stronger commitment to nature could lead to higher human interest in environmental protection (Restall & Conrad, 2015, p. 1).

Extrovertive mystical experiences - with their 'profound emotional effects' on the experiencer - may represent powerful facilitators of nature connectedness and pro-environmental behaviour. This could be an important area of future engagement for religious experience research going forward (cf. Kettner *et al.*, 2019).

Phenomenology and Ecology: Unity and Diversity

The next section will consider some of the key phenomenological features of extrovertive experiences, and consider in what ways they might resonate with ecological functions and processes (see Hunter 2021c, for a more thorough exploration on this thread). Extrovertive experiences in natural settings, as Stace pointed out, are often associated with a sense of unity and oneness in nature - a trait that links extrovertive experiences to classical mystical-type experiences, as cultivated in many of the world's mystical traditions (Anthony, Hermans & Sterkens, 2010). Take, for example, the following account of an extrovertive experience from the RERC archive:

> Some 12 years ago I used to have four tall Elm Trees on our garden lawn […] I was strongly drawn to these trees and used to stroke the trunks and talk to them […] I always felt their response through a strong vibration through my hands then

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> through my whole body. This convinced me that I am One with All Beings; the same life force which flows through my body flows through all vegetation, animals, birds, fish, minerals, under the ground or sea, even the very stones we walk on. Every animate and inanimate thing is held together with atoms which are of the whole 'Divine Being.'
>
> RERC Reference: 002384, Female, 1960.

The oneness of nature appears to be the essential theme of this experience - nature is understood as a single 'Divine Being' - but there are also extrovertive experiences that seem to reveal and emphasise diversity, complexity and multiplicity, rather than a purely monistic-unitary vision. The following account for example, emphasises not only the unity of the natural environment, but also the variety of different living and non-living forms that comprise it as a whole. The experience took place under the exceptional circumstances of the front-lines of the first world war in 1917:

> […] The nearer I drew to the village the more alive the surroundings seemed to become. It was as if something which had been dormant when I was in the wood were coming alive. I must have drifted into an exalted state. The moon, when I looked up at it, seemed to have become personalised and observant, as if it were aware of my presence […] A sweet scent filled the air. Early shoots were breaking from sticky buds of the balsam poplars […] The river conveyed that it had seen me before […] A feeling that I was being absorbed into the living surroundings gained in intensity and was working up to a climax […] [It] seemed to come out of the sky in which were resounding majestic harmonies. The thought, 'that is the music of the spheres' was immediately followed by a glimpse of luminous bodies - meteors or stars - circulating in predestined courses emitting both light and music.
>
> RERC Reference: 000035, Male, 1917.

Experiences such as this could be thought of as flashes of animistic insight - a realisation that, as Graham Harvey has eloquently put it, 'the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others' (Harvey, 2005, p. xi). In the above experience a dialogue is established between the experiencer and the river, the moon and the trees. But these multiple voices are just the prelude to the climax of the experience - a symphonic harmonising of the many diverse voices of nature into a whole conceived as 'the music of the spheres.' Extrovertive experiences, then, reveal an

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image of the world as *both* fundamentally 'unitary and interconnected' *and* 'diverse, complex and multiple.'

This both/and understanding of the natural world is also echoed in the structure and functioning of ecological systems - which are both holistic and multiplex in nature. The plant biologist Frederic Clements (1874-1945), for example, thought of ecosystems as large-scale organisms in their own right, consisting of a multitude of smaller interconnected organisms (plants, animals, and so on). Indeed, Clements observed that ecosystems have a tendency to develop *towards* increased complexity, and higher levels of biodiversity and interconnection over time. He called this process 'succession,' which he understood as a teleological (directional) progression toward what he called 'climax vegetation,' such as a forest. Clements conceived of the climax ecosystem as an 'organism or "superorganism" with its own life history, which followed predetermined, teleological paths,' constantly moving in the direction of greater biodiversity and 'the overall harmony and stability of the superorganism' (Foster & Clarke, 2008).[1] From Clements' perspective, natural systems may be thought of as harmonic wholes consisting of multiple component parts, a realisation arrived at through the observation of ecological systems, but that also resonates with the nature mystical experiences described above.

Extrovertive experiences, then, might be understood as instances when the experiencer no longer perceives a separation between themselves and the ecosystem that surrounds them, becoming simultaneously aware of the diversity and interconnectivity of life, as well as its underlying unity and their nested position with it. In these moments, when experience is in harmony with ecological reality, we might say that the experiencer has entered into a state of 'ecological consciousness,' or that they have developed an awareness of the 'ecological self.'

Extraordinary Experience and the Ecological Self

The concept of the 'ecological self' derives from the writings of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1912-2009), founder of the 'deep ecology' movement. Naess suggested that through the process of what he called 'self-realization' human beings will ultimately move away from egoic (bounded, individual) conceptions of the self towards an 'ecological self.' Naess does not give an explicit definition of the ecological self, but does

[1] For a discussion of some of the controversies surrounding the idea that ecosystems might be teleological super-organisms, as well as its off-shoot and extension - the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 2000) - see Hunter (2020) and Hunter (2019a). It is also interesting to note, as I have done in Hunter (2019a) that popular writers on the paranormal, such as journalist John Keel (1930-2009), also came to similar conclusions about the Earth as a living super-organism, though unlike ecologists his ideas were based on years spent chasing ghosts, monsters and UFOs (Hunter, 2019a, pp. 25-27).

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offer a brief sentence, suggesting that the "ecological self of a person is that with which [the] person identifies." He explains:

> This key sentence (rather than a definition) about the self shifts the burden of clarification from the term "self" to that of "identification," or rather "process of identification" (Naess, 1995, p. 227)

The ecological self emerges, therefore, when a person comes to identify the environment with themselves to the extent that they realise that conservation of the natural world is simultaneously an act of self-preservation. In essence, it is a realisation that there is no solid, impermeable boundary between the self and the ecosystem - that the self is deeply embedded within, and is a part of, the wider ecological system, and is connected to all other aspects of it. The science of ecology has long highlighted the complex connections between phenomena in the natural world - from interactions between species within an ecosystem, to interactions between ecosystems in the wider global system, and beyond. Ecological consciousness is an awareness of this fundamental interconnection, and the ecological self is the model we construct from that knowledge to orient us in the world.

In the previous issue of this journal - on the theme of 'The Future of the Study of Religious and Spiritual Experience' - I wrote an article (Hunter, 2021a) that sought to show how there are very often considerable overlaps between those experiences that are labelled as 'paranormal' - even the most extreme of paranormal experiences, referred to as 'high strangeness' cases - and those experiences that are frequently classified as 'religious,' 'mystical' or 'spiritual.' There are phenomenological similarities - the role of light in many extraordinary experiences, for example, as well as similarities in terms of their after-effects. All manner of extraordinary experiences have been found to be associated with the emergence of greater identification with the natural world. Life-time experience with psychedelics has been found to be associated with an enhanced sense of nature connectedness, for example (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). An apparent connection between out-of-body experiences (OBE), near-death experiences (NDE), alien abduction experiences and a renewed sense of connection to nature has also been recognised in the literature (Ring & Valarino, 2006, p. 125). Is it a co-incidence that paranormal, religious and other extraordinary experiences are associated with both expanded notions of the self and an enhanced sense of nature connectedness?[2]

One possible line of reasoning that I have been exploring in relation to the emergence of ecological consciousness following extraordinary experiences is that these

[2] For more on the relationship of the ecological self to extraordinary experiences see Hunter 2020b and 2020c.

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experiences - whether an alien abduction experience, extrovertive mystical experience, of magic mushroom trip - effectively shake experiencers out of their everyday routines, cultural frameworks and habits and remind them that they are part of a wider living system. The ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood (1939-2008), for example, reported a transformation of consciousness that followed in the wake of a particularly intense, and highly extraordinary experience in the terrifying grip of a crocodile's death twist. Plumwood survived the ordeal, and went on to write about it in great detail, but what is of particular interest here is the way that the experience - much like the paranormal and religious experiences discussed above - shifted her perspective from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric point of view:

> Before the encounter, it was as if I saw the whole universe as framed by my own narrative, as though the two were joined perfectly and seamlessly together. As my own narrative and the larger story were ripped apart, I glimpsed a shockingly indifferent world in which I had no more significance than any other edible being. The thought, *This can't be happening to me, I'm a human being. I am more than just food!* was one component of my terminal incredulity. It was a shocking reduction, from a complex human being to a mere piece of meat […] Large predators like lions and crocodiles present an important test for us. An ecosystem's ability to support large predators is a mark of its ecological integrity. Crocodiles and other creatures that can take human life also present a test of our acceptance of our ecological identity. When they're allowed to live freely, these creatures indicate our preparedness to coexist with the otherness of the earth, and to recognize ourselves in mutual, ecological terms, as part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater (Plumwood, 2000).

Paranormal and religious experiences may also perform the same function as Plumwood's crocodile experience - in the case of alien abduction experiences, or other forms of entity encounter, for example, reminding the experiencer that they are part of a much larger 'invisible ecosystem,' and that they are not at the top of the food chain (Foster, 2019 and Grieve-Carlson, 2019). This may also go some way towards explaining why there can also be positive effects (such as an enhanced sense of nature connection and pro-environmental behaviour), as a result of very negative and frightening experiences (crocodiles and abductions), as well as from positive experiences (such as interactions with entities on psychedelics, or experiences of mystical union with nature, for example). Ecological consciousness, then, may be thought of more as a remembering of our embededdness in ecological systems - a remembering brought about when the

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blinkers of our cultural models slip aside - rather than necessarily as a byproduct, emergent property, or a pre-condition of extraordinary experiences. Extraordinary experiences of all different types appear to remind us of something that our cultural models have convinced us to ignore - our relationship with the world.

Decolonising Religious Experience Research

Another of the suggestions for future directions for research on religious and spiritual experiences made in the last issue was for a greater engagement with indigenous research methods, the inclusion of indigenous research perspectives, and greater representation for indigenous research on extraordinary experience. Religious experience researchers have adopted a range of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies since the discipline's inception in the nineteenth century, which has contributed to our diverse and interdisciplinary field of research. Increasingly, however, historians of science are demonstrating that the research paradigms of the human and social sciences continue to perpetuate - often in subtle ways - out-dated colonialist models for understanding the world, as well as ontological assumptions that are not necessarily shared by non-Western (and especially indigenous) societies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

There is a tendency - even in work on religious experience - for social-scientific research methods to adopt positivist perspectives, methods and approaches that by their nature are at odds with the subject matter of religious experience research. Similarly, scientific research on religious experience has tended to be reductive in nature, attempting to find the location of a 'God Spot' in the brain, for example, or to create neat taxonomies of religious and spiritual experiences. These tendencies are a part of the cultural baggage that scientific religious experience research continues to carry, even when its own research findings often seem to point toward different ontological possibilities. Extrovertive experiences, for instance - which are very well documented in the literature, as we have seen - often seem to collapse any kind of distinction between the observer and the observed, or the subject and the object. This is, of course, a challenge to the notion of scientific objectivity itself, and leads to a sense cognitive dissonance in the field of religious experience research between what the data suggests and what the dominant paradigm will actually allow.

The growing field of indigenous research methods (which begin from *very* different ontological starting points to western scientific research methods), however, may offer new and exciting avenues for research on religious experience going forward - directions that do not rely on the assumptions that have shaped mainstream Western approaches to religious experience research. Indigenous research methodologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith,

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for example, summarises the key differences between indigenous and dominant Western-scientific[3] epistemologies:

> The indigenous research agenda is broad in its scope and ambitious in its intent. There are some things which make this agenda very different from the research agenda of large scientific organisations or of various national science research programmes. There are other elements, however, which are similar to any research programme which connects research to the 'good' of society. The elements that are different can be found in key words such as healing, decolonization, spiritual, recovery. These terms seem at odds with the research terminology of Western science, much too politically interested rather than neutral and objective (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 122).

Perhaps, unlike the positivist approach that has underlined most 'scientific' and 'social-scientific' research on religious experience in the past - and which denies the spiritual *a priori* - an approach that draws from indigenous methodologies might place the spiritual reality that these experiences seem to indicate on a level playing field with the social, cultural, psychological and other factors that are at play (and which Western science is much more willing to engage with). Arguing along related lines, in his chapter in *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), Ioway historian Lance Foster re-tells the story of Plenty Coups (1848-1932), chief of the Crow Nation, and his encounter with a water spirit while crossing the Missouri River. After a terrifying ordeal Plenty Coups and his band escape the Water-person, but rather than return to the site to investigate further, or to hunt for the mysterious creature to bring it home as a trophy, an offering is left and the location noted as an inhabited place best avoided. The story presents a radically different approach to extraordinary experiences to that generally employed in the Western scientific study of religious experience:

> The indigenous way to encounter the invisible ecosystem was summed up by Plenty Coups: When you encounter strange things in this life, you just acknowledge their right to be here, the same as anything else; you leave them alone, and go on your way. But what I see is that it seems to be near impossible for the nonindigenous to leave things alone (Foster, 2019, p. 96).

[3] Not all Western traditions necessarily share the same ontological assumptions as the 'Western-scientific' worldview.

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Many indigenous societies understand that the world is fundamentally alive in a sense that is not recognized by mainstream materialist science. As an illustration of this key difference between indigenous and Western knowledge systems, biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer gives the example of the Anishinaabe word Puhpowee, which is defined as "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth over night." She goes on to add that "[t]he makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 49). Anishinaabe natural science is, therefore, an animistic natural science. These are very different foundations to those upon which the Western social scientific study of religious experience are built. Indigenous research begins from a holistic perspective rather than attempting to dissect, break apart of reduce the complexity of experience in the world. What, then, might the study of religious experience look like if it started from the principle of an animate natural world, or from an ontology of relationship, or holism, or complexity, or from a perspective that rejects the division of self and other, or internal and external? These are big questions and exciting opportunities for future exploration.

Summary

To briefly summarise, there has been a long-standing recognition of the relationship between religious, mystical and spiritual experience and the natural world, indeed Sir Alister Hardy's fascination with these two fields stemmed from his own extrovertive experiences as a young boy. Extrovertive experiences seem to reveal a dynamic relationship between unity and diversity in nature - some experiences seem to emphasise the underlying oneness of nature, while others emphasise multiplicity and complexity. This dynamic relationship is also reflected in perspectives that have emerged from ecological science, which point to ecosystems as holistic entities made up of many constituent interacting parts. Extrovertive experiences seem to be moments when the experiencer becomes aware of, and experiences themselves to be a part of, these wider systems of complexity. This may represent what Deep Ecologists have called 'ecological consciousness' or the 'ecological self.' Ecological consciousness emerges in situations where our cultural models are shattered or exanded, and we realise our place in the ecosystem. Ecological consciousness is not necessarily, therefore, a consequence or precondition of extraordinary experience, but rather my be a remembering of our embeddedess in ecological systems. Finally, perspectives from indigenous research methodologies and alternative ontological frameworks may help to overcome the cognitive dissonance that emerges when a discipline founded on positivist principles comes face-to-face with phenomena that seem to point to different ontological

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possibilities and a spiritual reality. Greater engagement with indigenous research methods and perspective may go a long way toward revitalising the holistic study of nature and religious experience.

This Issue

The first of our papers exploring the connections between ecology and religious experience is Renaud Evrard's contribution, which introduces the work of French sociologist and writer on the paranormal Bertrand Méheust, and draws particular attention to his synthesis of parapsychological and ecological themes. The major themes of Méheust's work are examined in relation to ecology, and Evrard concludes by summarising some of the key points of overlap between the worldview implied by ecological science and the findings and implications of parapsychological research.

Next, Aitor Boada-Benito's paper looks at the role of nature in early Christian hagiographic texts. Specifically, the paper examines the *Acts of Shirin*, a text that narrates the birth, conversion to Christianity, and subsequent capture and execution of Shirin, a young female Zoroastrian aristocrat born in 7th century Iraq. The account of Shirin's brutal death at the hands of her Zoroastrian persecutors contains several descriptions of environmental transformations surrounding the execution, in particular changes in the weather, which were seen as proof of Shirin's sanctity. Boada-Benito argues that the understanding of nature presented in hagiographical texts such as Shirin's were an important component in the way that early Christian's constructed their sense of identity.

In 'Forests and Giants,' Rick Fehr takes us on a dream-time wander into the dark forests of Northern Ontario, where the interplay of shadow and light gives rise to simulacra and the sense of being watched through the trees by non-human eyes. Through the lens of his own fictional writings about giants, and the influence of the trees on his writing process, Fehr explores the twilight world of the forest as the meeting point of ecology and the imagination - where uncanny experiences (real or imagined) give rise to stories of other-than-human presences that serve to further animate the environment and invite us to participate and dream.

Next, in 'Madoodiswan as Sacred Maternal Pedagogy,' Renee E. Mazinegiizhigookwe Bedard begins the process of representing an indigenous perspective on visionary experiences. Rooted in Anishnaabe tradition and worldview, Bedard's paper explores the pedagogic function of the Madoodiswan (sweatlodge) ceremony in providing a maternal-reconnection to the first Mother, Aki (Earth), and Gizhew-Manidoo (Creator; Great Spirit Being; The Great Mystery). She shares the story of her own visionary sweatlodge experience as a "foundation for exploring the dynamics and complexities of Anishinaabe-

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kwewag understandings of ecology in connection to land, ceremony, womanhood, motherhood, teaching, learning, and knowledge creation," and as a point of dialogue about traditional knowledge for indigenous women.

Next, Kip Redick introduces the concept of 'kenotic walking' - 'walking self-emptying' - in the context of long distance wilderness hiking. Redick argues that long distance hiking can be understood as a contemporary form of pilgrimage, and that the trials and processes of such feats of endurance can help to shift hikers out of their normal state of consciousness into flow states and into greater communion with the human and extra-human constituents of the natural environment.

The final contribution to this issue is a short paper outlining the evolution of the MA in Ecology and Spirituality, currently being taught as an on-line distance learning course by the Sophia Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David. The paper features extracts from an interview with Dr. Andy Letcher, who helped to initiate the first incarnation of the MA at Schumacher College on the Dartington Estate in Devon. The paper concludes with an overview of the different strands currently being explored by staff and students on the MA in its most recent form.

I hope you enjoy the issue!

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Bertrand Méheust's Work in Progress: *"…from the ecology of anomalous experiences, to a political ecology"*

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Introduction

Bertrand Méheust was born in 1947, is a retired professor of philosophy, and a member of the Institut Métapsychique International [International Metapsychic Institute]. The IMI is France's largest parapsychology research organisation and was founded in 1919. Méheust's intellectual itinerary encompasses the study of religious experience and ecology and he is a specialist in "the epistemology of the taboos of knowledge" (Méheust & Lagrange, 2019). As a student of philosophy, his first research was focused on William James while the prevailing convention among his colleagues at the time was to concentrate on authors dealing with structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. His primary interest was in philosophies of nature, as opposed to those of the city, with the essential idea that "we can only understand Man if we replace him within a cosmic reality" (Méheust & Evrard, 2007). Close to nature during his childhood and a keen observer of people and their institutions as an adult (Méheust, 2014, p. 165), his intellectual journey has led him from the study of anomalous experiences in ufology and parapsychology to the study of political ecology.

Méheust's Anomalistic Work

Ufology Studies

Bertrand Méheust earned his reputation from an original work in 1978 entitled: *Science-fiction et Soucoupes Volantes: une réalité mythicophysique* [Science Fiction and Flying Saucers: a mythophysical reality]. Drawing on a particularly rich corpus, he identified parallels between, on the one hand, reported observations of flying saucers and encounters with extraterrestrials; and on the other, the science fiction literature published prior to 1947. Stories from that period predate certain cultural and scientific aspects of ufology that coalesced into the forms we know today. His study addresses several

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reductionist and non-reductionist hypotheses in an attempt to explain this coincidence, while acknowledging that he does not fully succeed. The book leaves the riddle open: myths have *both* cultural and natural facets.

The twentieth century saw the birth of a contemporary myth - that of flying saucers. But this myth cannot be reduced to the direct effect of a preceding imaginary culture because it was constructed from individual, or what Boccara (1989) has called mythical, experiences. Michel Boccara was the anthropologist with whom Méheust worked as an associate member of the French National Centre for Scientific Research, as documented by Méheust, Rabeyron & Zafiropoulos (2004).

Méheust's first book in 1978 was a bestseller because it not only brought a scholarly and intellectual approach to a generally marginalised phenomenon, but was also published by the respected Parisian publisher Mercure de France. The author continued along this path in a vain attempt to rally researchers, and from the human sciences and ethnology in particular (Méheust, 1985; 1992), for a study of what he called ufological experiences, and including alien abduction encounters. He recently returned to the challenges and conclusions of this line of research in the preface to a reprint of his original work (Méheust, 2020).

The History of Mesmerism and Psychical Research

Following a foray into territory combining philosophy, ethnology, and folklore, Méheust patiently constructed another object of study: the history of animal magnetism, hypnosis, and psychical research. The transition between these themes occurred through various personal encounters, including the important influence of Aimé Michel (1919-1992) whom Méheust has referred to as his master. This scientific writer, largely unrecognised outside France, contributed to the fantastic realism movement through his ability to deal with anomalistic as well as current scientific questions, in particular the mysteries of the animal world (see Méheust, 2008). Michel contributed to parapsychological research from 1953 onward and wrote a book in 1973 summarising the work of Thurston (1952) on the wonders associated with saints and mystics. The shift between ufology, ecology, parapsychology, and ascetic and mystical phenomenology, comprised part of Aimé Michel's corpus.

The historical study undertaken by Méheust spanned 18 years up until the completion of his sociology thesis in 1997, which was published the following year. Unlike other historiographies (Ellenberger, 1970), Méheust has emphasised the conflict between the views of Man and the world, pitting proponents of the psyche's marvellous phenomena against the disparagers. He finds it symptomatic that the violence of this

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epistemic conflict was expunged from the official record, a prelude to its subsequent banishment from debate when academic mores became more policed (Méheust, 2012, p. 119).

Far from supporting the rationalist conclusions that had retrospectively passed judgement on the apparent lack of interest in these spiritual movements, and which had placed the assumed impossibility of psychic phenomena at the very centre of the rationalist programme, Méheust instead documented barely-known elements of the controversies prevailing during that bygone era, when lucidity, deep trance, and the influence of spirit upon matter were first seriously investigated.

The successive and approximate verdicts which dismissed these phenomena in order to support the dominant Western worldview were promulgated under conditions of relatively balanced ideological and institutional competition. Thus, the question of the reality of animal magnetism phenomena had divided the elites, in particular the French Academy of Medicine at the beginning of the nineteenth century and before the subject was officially dismissed. Méheust systematically dissected the "discourse of the victors," which had effectively disfigured the narrative of these historical currents. In so doing, he reopened the issue and awakened the old controversies, creating numerous hostilities with his contemporaries (Charuty, 2001; Méheust & Mancini, 2002).

The book *Somnambulisme et Médiumnité* [*Somnambulism and Mediumship*] written by Méheust in 1999 is considered an essential and fundamental work by French parapsychologists. Untranslated, it received little response abroad with the exception of an analysis by Jeffrey Kripal (2010), the philosopher of religion who designated Méheust "an author of the impossible" alongside Myers, Fort, and Vallée. Méheust joined the IMI on 26th March 2000 and was frequently one of its spokespersons.

He published numerous works on matters relating to the history, philosophy, and anthropology of parapsychology,[1] which included: examinations of the famous 19th-century seer Alexis Didier (Méheust, 2003); prejudices against metapsychics (Méheust, 2004); extra-sensory perception in general (Méheust, 2005); paranormal phenomena associated with the S.S. Titanic (Méheust, 2006); and comparative metagnomy (Méheust, 2011), a hermeneutical method he introduced to analyse the trajectories and performances of the subjects of paranormal and religious experience from antiquity to the era of psychical research and through to our contemporary period. He also applied this analytical method to the miracles of Jesus in a work we shall examine as belonging to his period of reflection upon ecological themes.

[1] Méheust (2014, p. 164) makes a distinction between metapsychics, "which proposes the study of qualitative phenomena, captured in their biotope," and parapsychology, which seeks to study quantitative phenomena in the rarefied setting of the laboratory.

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Political Ecology Work

Ecology and Political Obstacles

Méheust's first essay on political ecology in 2009 is entitled *La Politique de l'Oxymore*: *comment ceux qui nous gouvernent nous masquent la réalité du monde* [*The Politics of the Oxymoron: how those who govern us mask the reality of the world*]. The oxymoron is a figure of speech combining two words of contradictory or incompatible meaning: its effect is to temporarily fascinate and paralyse the reasoning mind. In the political context it becomes a technique for inhibiting the free flow of thought among critical opponents of policy, and for examples we might choose: sustainable development; rational farming; free market regulation; ethical capitalism; social distancing; and asymptomatic disease [dis-ease]. Consequently, rather than flatly denying the major challenges of the ecological crisis, a section of the political world is able to raise an even more powerful defence: the idea of a possible compatibility between society as it currently functions and the protection of the biosphere.

Alongside his political criticism, Méheust invites us to reflect on the internal regulatory processes that allow a social system to "persevere in its being." Using several examples, he shows how a transformation yearned for by some only ever really occurs when the system reaches a state so far from equilibriuim as to compel change from without. This form of "methodical pessimism" states and observes that no "mental universe" ever gives up on its own but always prefers to try and reframe, in a diluted and harmless form, the anomaly which has destabilised it. Hence the hypothesis of a privileged use of the oxymoron by reactionaries.

From the beginning of his book Méheust (2009, pp. 21-26) draws upon his work on the history of Mesmerism to demonstrate how the vilified practice of animal magnetism - initially intellectually contested then eventually officially outlawed - suddenly reappeared in watered-down form under the name of hypnotism. By the end of the 19th century it had even became the dominant paradigm in sciences of the mind. In an analogous way ecology was abruptly restored "by a capitalist and financial system which had first crushed it with its contempt" (Méheust, 2009, p. 22).

The difference between these two cases is presented as one of urgency: "If we want to, we can live without paranormal phenomena, but we cannot continue the current march forward without perishing" (Méheust, 2009, pp. 23-24). He nevertheless introduces a subject for reflection, though not fully developing it at that time: "The proponents of Mesmerism are also occasionally the precursors of ecology, and there is a deep affinity

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between an ecology of the spirit sketched out by the theorists of Mesmerism and ecology in the sense in which we understand it today" (Méheust, 2009, p. 24).

Given the success of the book, Méheust republished it five years later with a new afterword, entitled: *Le Cosmique et la Cité: regard rétrospectif sur un parcours atypique* [*The Cosmic and the City: a retrospective look at an unusual journey*]. It explains the importance of the personal element in the shaping of ecological thinking, including that of his own: "The weakening of carnal contact with nature leads to a progressive acceptance, through trivialisation and indifference, of what would have been perceived before as unbearable" (Méheust, 2014, p. 167).

He then returns to articulating his combined interest in paranormal and ecological matters: "Far from being mutually exclusive, these two interests are profoundly linked, not only in my mind but for the tradition that carried them" (p. 170). He goes on to identify the utopian socialist movement in particular, which has drawn on sources from esotericism, mysticism, Mesmerism, and certain currents within Christianity. He then propounds the paradigm of *cosmic solidarity* which, in rejecting the mechanistic paradigm, offers a vision of the world closer to the German *Naturphilosophie* according to which everything in the world is interconnected. This novel view of the universe is notably influenced the political thinking of Jean Jaurès, the great French socialist who, according to Méheust, "concluded his philosophy thesis with the grandiose view of universal entanglement revealed by progress in the psychical sciences" (p. 172).

In his prologue, Méheust centres his combined historical research and ecological enquiry around the general question of "how societies succeed in 'managing' events, changes, new knowledge and practices that seem to compromise their economy (in the very general sense of the term)" (p. 174). Mesmerism is assimilated with an "epistemological aggression" opening a 150-year conflict whose challenge was none other than "to redefine the structure of the human personality for the times to come" (p. 174). This is an essential point in Méheust's theory: the "plasticity of the psyche" (Mancini, 2006) that allows man to constantly recreate himself.

The image man has of himself therefore has palpable consequences for reality. According to Méheust, the philosopher who does most to highlight this idea is Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) with his theory of creative imagination. And so for Méheust, this author "reconciles the cosmic and the City" by showing how the worldview of a social group, in its *describing-building* of human and non-human characteristics, plays a full part in actual and tangible achievements (2014, p. 177).

The essential quality of a great philosophy like Castoriadis' is its capacity to encompass "the cosmic, nature, and the sciences" and to "deal with the human being only when placed within the whole" (p. 178). Nowadays, it is as rare to find political

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thinkers concerned with the epistemic and ontological aspects of anomalous experience as it is to find anomalists discussing the influence of political factors on their own area of study.

Social Metamorphoses and the Sacred

In between the two editions of *La Politique de l'Oxymore* (2012), Méheust wrote another essay that failed to find an audience, in part because of its provocative and ambiguous title: 'La Nostalgie de l'Occupation: peut-on encore se rebeller contre les nouvelles formes d'asservissement?' ['Nostalgia for the Occupation: are we still able to rebel against new forms of slavery?'] The main argument of the essay consists in showing the difficulty society has in coping with ecological disaster by comparing the situation with resistance to Nazi imperialism, specifically Germany's occupation of France between 1940 and 1944. This period was subject of a "strange fascination" (p. 9) that was returned to in other discourses to become the prototype of absolute horror in his analyses of how folk successfully organised themselves to resist and rebel against Nazi crimes. But why have people not succeeded in resisting an even greater crime - assuming it is comparable - affecting humanity as a whole, and more besides: namely, the current ecocide? Méheust analyses the taboo that prevents a comparison of today's political leaders, whom he considers accomplices to the ecocide, with yesterday's Nazi leaders (p. 20). Viewed in the short term the comparison seems invalid but appears more reasonable with the adoption of a different time scale:

> The deadly violence that the Nazis unleashed on Europe was unprecedented in history, but it was brief because it was suicidal. The delayed violence that neocapitalism exerts on the entire planet unfolds on another spatial and temporal scale. It is a 'slow invasion,' a 'soft apocalypse,' the worst of which remains invisible and nothing seems to be able to stop it, except the self-destruction of the system. Its banal, diluted, delayed character, the legal and smiling masks under which it camouflages its propagation, all this makes it almost imperceptible to the majority of humans (p. 22).

Thus, in its current guise, there is no evil *per se* responsible for ecocide - and neither formally designated enemies nor uniforms to rebel against - because the existential threat is filtered through a veil of comfort and disinformation. Consequently, the solidarity of opposition is weaker and the prospect of a worldwide transformation, a revolutionary

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disruption which might reverse the present biocidal trend, is all the less likely. The irony is our ability to passively watch this catastrophe unfold before our very eyes:

> The dominant feature of our time is the powerlessness of knowledge and even its apparent uselessness. Never has humanity headed for a catastrophe of such magnitude and never has it had so much information about what is going on (p. 56).

Méheust goes on to provide examples from the history of parapsychology - pages 76-77 compare Mesmerism to "a 'pocket of resistance' which has enabled the resurgence and development of forms of experience banished by the accredited vision of man and the world"; and they identify traditional "'biotopes' favourable to the expression of very deep forms of trance and in which skills and practices relating to these states of consciousness have been maintained" and which facilitate the manifestation of strange powers.

Méheust extracted the biological concept of the biotope from the work of the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (1995; 1998) who had employed it in the social sciences to designate a local manifestation of a human phenomenon fuelled by a set of constraining and facilitating factors: for example, "transient mental illnesses" epidemically affecting a given socio-cultural space. Méheust (2012, p. 77) adopts the notions of pockets of resistance and biotopes because of their tendency to disappear and so draws an analogy with the difficulty of finding good mediums with which to pursue psychical research - a singularly novel form, one is inclined to think, of declining biodiversity.

As this work was written around the time of the Arab Spring of 2011, Méheust saw a slightly more optimistic solution based on these examples of social revolution. His interest was in the power of those moments of collective turmoil leading to the collapse of political systems, in this case dictatorships. For him, certain essential ingredients of these successful challenges are lacking in democracies because the "temperature" of revolt is cleverly cooled down by numerous defusing processes stemming from rational governance (p. 91). Hence the decisive importance of the critical thresholds through which social life cyclically passes: "It is in these moments of particular intensity that supernatural beings re-emerge, that are invented or reinvented ritual gestures" (Méheust, 2015, p. 355) This peaceful political modality has ecological consequences:

> […] rational governance, by perpetuating a way of life dangerous for the biosphere, always makes flashbacks and/or bifurcations difficult. By preventing the critical temperature which allows the overhaul of deep structures from being reached, or at least by delaying the critical thresholds, it exempts our society from

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> questioning itself and allows it to always postpone the decisions that are necessary (Méheust, 2012, p. 93).

Among the "inhibitory devices" protecting society from anything that might change its trajectory, he lists on pages 95-96:

> Globalisation, comfort pressure, ever greater dependence on technical macrosystems, the mechanism of credit and debt, the formatting of minds by advertising propaganda, the "strategy of chaos", the coercive use of crises, communication techniques such as systematic recourse to oxymorons, the rise of individualism and consumerism, the "dictatorship of immediacy", the enormous inertia of the system, international economic competition, and the ever-increasing power of surveillance and control.

He is not in favour of voluntary violence but notes that the renouncement of reasoned and proportionate counter-violence, especially more or less illegal action not involving physical violence against people, paves the way to abuses of power (p. 124).

By listing these different aspects the chapter ends up being as surprising as it is essential. Exploring the theme of "the Societal Big Bang and the Sacred," on pages 125-144, Méheust analyses the "sociomorphic" virtue of those moments of collective overheating using the metaphor of a melting point. But he then goes beyond the political problem to consider these social phenomena from a more encompassing point of view by relating them to the problem of the sacred.

Here ecologists are divided in their analysis of how crises of civilisation correlate with crises of ecology: some think it futile to hope that traditional secular values will be sufficient to release humanity from its deadlock. Instead they theorise that a return to the heteronomic form of an immanent and transcendent signifying-cosmos might stymie the devastating forces threatening to sweep us away. Others still cling to the old atheist and autonomist conception of democracy (p. 129).

On page 130 Méheust employs the special meaning of sacredness proposed by the sociologist Émile Durkheim at the beginning of the twentieth century, and thus views it as "a perennial and founding dimension of human experience" that is irreducible to religions. Durkheim (1913) had argued that this experience of the sacred is not purely illusory but is brought about by forces that have the capacity to change the world. And so for Méheust (2012, p. 132) a collective effervescence plays a crucial role: "a human group does not really become a society until it has gone through these moments of effervescence which constitute its true 'baptism." However, one obstacle is that this

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collective effervescence "cannot be ordained" (p. 199). In summary, Durkheim had considered the sacred a matrix of the social bond and "a source of power upon which societies can draw in order to maintain and transform both themselves and the world, and which we can cyclically observe throughout human history at moments of high intensity" (see Méheust, 2012, p. 133). Méheust refers here to messianic liberation movements and associates the political dimension with religious exaltation, a theme explored in books viewing Jesus as a thaumaturge (Méheust, 2015; Ellenberger, 1978).

An interesting aspect of this sociological approach is that it does not reject the study of individual experiences. Durkheim had even made individual momentary and psychological experiences a phase in a system: "It is the pressure of collective thought on the individual which generates the moments of exaltation by which he becomes creative, just as it is the creative moment of the individual which 'recharges' and restructures collective thought" (see Méheust, 2012, p. 135). This systemic unity of the individual and the collective is called *coalescence* and serves to link an individual's experience of the sacred with the community they are a part of and help to shape.

A final essential point is the impact, in terms of innovation, of individual experiences of the sacred. On page 137 Méheust integrates the ideas of Max Weber (1964), for whom the abnormal experiences of certain exceptional characters were the source of social innovation. Such individuals were the bearers of charisms or charismata, the strange energy emanating from certain individuals and capable of transforming their social environment. "In a revolutionary and sovereign way," writes Weber, "the power of charism transmutes all values and breaks all inherited rules and norms" (see Moscovici, 1988). In a footnote, and referring for the first time to George Hansen's book on the Trickster, Méheust (2012, p. 138) underlines the parapsychological dimension of the abnormal experiences and charisms which are at the root of social metamorphoses. This dimension had particularly been overlooked by commentators on Weber, although it is actually quite explicit in his texts.

In short, in its individual and collective dimensions, the sacred is part of the equation of the political ecology portrayed by Méheust. He has more confidence in it than in technical, political, or violent means of derailing the ecocidal course. However, Méheust's account lacks details of the processes involved and, in the last chapters of the book, returns to political factors such as the General Strike, where it is considered as a political myth with "driving force."

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Back to Metapsychics

In 2015 book *Jésus Thaumaturge: enquête sur l'homme et ses miracles* [*Jesus the Thaumaturge: investigating the man and his miracles]*, Méheust takes a metapsychic perspective on the apparent miracles attributed to Jesus. While disputing the official dating of the canonical Gospels, he nevertheless relies on them in the belief that certain of their constituent elements show they can be attributed to contemporary witnesses of the phenomena reported. Adopting the comparative *metagnomy* method, Méheust shows how Jesus is similar to other subjects of paranormal and religious experience, including his possession of trickster-like character traits; yet he also reveals himself to be different in other respects, such as his rare recourse to altered states of consciousness. In short, Méheust approaches Jesus as a *kratophany,* or manifestation of a power, rather than as a *hierophany* or manifestation of the sacred (van der Leeuw, 1948), in an account that more plausibly explains the birth of the Christian movement.

The short twenty-second chapter, entitled: *Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, George Hansen: Psi and Societal Big Bangs*, (Méheust, 2015, pp. 355-359), connects his investigation of Jesus with the theme of political ecology. How might we explain a massive historical process like Christianity as resulting from the power of a thaumaturge? Yet it is Max Weber's central thesis that the individual and his paranormal experience are the true source of social innovation. Parapsychological, mystical, and political dimensions emerge simultaneously as a complex whole and become inseparable: "We see something new spring up and establish intense and unprecedented relationships, which will subsequently cool and freeze" (Méheust, 2015, p. 357).

To account for these "societal Big Bangs," Moscovici (1988) used the metaphor of *singularities*, which in physics are nodes where the prevailing laws of a system are superseded with the emergence of new ones. Psi lends itself particularly well to this concept of transformation and implies that an entire collective universe may be generated from a singularity. Méheust strengthens his conceptual field by speaking now of a *social-metamorphic* process:

> When tension in a social group reaches an optimal level, we regularly see bearers of charisms who appear to be capable of triggering the social-metamorphic process. In certain mythologies, this character is called the Trickster (Méheust, 2015, p. 358).

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Méheust integrates Hansen's theory to make Jesus a typical incarnation of the trickster figure and an anti-structuralist par excellence, while construing “the Jesus event” as a textbook case (p. 358-359).

An interesting point of fact is that the very parameters of the system in which subjects of paranormal and religious experience evolve actually condition the possibility of the phenomena’s occurrence. By citing Guy Lyon Playfair (1987, p. 310) in connection with Uri Geller, Méheust (2015, p. 270) adopts the idea that it is during chaotic conditions that the thaumaturge is able to shake up daily reality and replace it with his own. This return to the power of an individual allows us to remain in touch with sociological analysis while preserving the essential principle of a *systemic unity of the individual and collective*.

In 2018 Méheust published his first novel: *La Conversion de Guillaume Portail : comment l’homme le plus riche du monde s’en est pris au capitalisme* [The Conversion of Guillaume Portail: how the richest man in the world attacked capitalism]. The story’s central theme is of a political ecology which has met with some local success in France owing to a Franco-American billionaire who strategically devotes his entire fortune to applying the most effective solutions to ecological problems. Parapsychology and the sacred are brought together again because the hero’s “conversion” is linked to a clairvoyance session performed under the auspices of an avatar of the IMI. The proposed solution nevertheless remains marked by the struggle of money against money, with only a marginal function for the sacred and the anomalous.

Some passages of the book, for example ‘Conclave 11,’ take on the appearance of an essay. Pages 148-150 explain how the connection between parapsychology and ecology is formed through two mirrored concepts: on the one hand, the “solidarity of the living,” which is the central fact of ecological reflection; and on the other, a “cosmic entanglement” as highlighted by parapsychology. Combined, these twin concepts become the notion of a “cosmic solidarity” revealed through progress in metapsychics. Cosmic solidarity had been present in Victor Hugo’s vision of the world and society and also appeared in the political thinking of Jean Jaurès (1892) while finishing his philosophical thesis on the grandiose scheme of universal entanglement (see below: unpublished essay).

Parapsychology might demonstrate the empirical basis of this solidarity if more credit were given to an anthropological view compatible with the ecological question. In addition, says Méheust (2018, p. 150), supporters of ecology and supporters of parapsychology have several opponents in common - a sure sign of their convergence.

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The Essay on Jean Jaurès

The French politician Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) had a lesser known occupation as a metaphysical philosopher, which Méheust rehabilitates in an as yet unpublished essay, entitled: *Jaurès Trois Fois Assassiné* [Jaurès killed three times]. Jaurès' thinking used parapsychology to establish a cosmic vision of humanity that was to guide his political action. According to Méheust, Jaurès' use of certain notions makes him "one of the fathers of deep ecology," who had laid its philosophical foundations.

An important notion in his philosophy is *universal interpenetration*: the idea of there being no absolute vacuum separating objects and human beings, with everything being linked by a common substance. Everything is intertwined, entangled, interpenetrated: everything exists within all. To this principle Jaurès added *universal animation*, the idea of the world as a living creature, which led him to his biological and evolutionary pantheism.

The philosopher Charles Rappoport (1915) augmented these principles with *cosmic* or *universal solidarity*, concluding that the universe was "a kind of cosmic democracy where everything is organically linked, where everything stands together and where everything supports and makes everything live" (Rappoport, 1915, pp. 317-318). Méheust detects a thematic community with certain esoteric thinking, in particular Paracelsus' Christian esotericism which sought to reorganise human relationships by bringing them into harmony with cosmic solidarity. Paracelsus made several political proposals which Méheust associates with communism.

But for the sake of demonstration Jaurès made explicit reference to the data of psychical research, most notably in the final chapter of his thesis:

> [These phenomena] attest to the fact that there are extraordinary and unknown powers in man, which are zero or almost in their normal state, but which manifest themselves in certain states which we call abnormal. There is in us an unknown ego which can exert a direct action on the matter, lift by an energetic will a foreign body as if it were its own body, pierce with the gaze the opacity of an obstacle and collect from a distance across space the unexpressed thought of another self. One wonders if there are not yet the obscure elements of a new progress of consciousness and life on our planet (Jaurès, 1892, pp. 415-416)

Jaurès enlists psychic science to prove universal interconnection and thereby give a cosmic foundation to his conception of solidarity, with the brain playing an important role beyond being a mere organic envelope isolated from the world. Alluding to the aspect of psychic life known as "the paranormal," he assumes the brain to be perpetually involved

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and integrant with the known world in a "continual and subtle exchange of secret activity." By drawing metaphysical conclusions from this principle, he deduces an ecological vision whereby each finite being is reinstated within a living unity:

> Thus, the human brains and the earth, by descent and by harmony, form one system or, at least, a beginning of system and organisation. And if these brains, developing their magnetic action and their lucidity, manage to grasp, even in the unknown depths of the earth, the thrill of all the forces by mixing the energy of their will and the light of their thought, they will be really the brains of the earth. In addition, if all these human brains communicate with each other effortlessly, if they easily put in common, without being confused, their thoughts, their emotions, their decisions through the all burning space of spiritual life, the conscious life of earth will not be localized in a very small cerebral organ; but, just as the earth is enveloped by an atmosphere of life, it will be enveloped by an atmosphere of thought, which, penetrating into its depths, will communicate consciousness with all its forces and will truly create the living unity of the planet (Jaurès, 1892, pp. 418-419).

The political views of this left-wing leader were therefore fuelled by his metaphysical attempt to "place man in the immense cosmic environment." Although he did not have a direct influence on ecologists, he is described by Méheust as a *proto-ecological* thinker through whom the ecological movement was rejuvenated.

Paradoxically, Jaurès' conclusions seem particularly spiritual considering he had constructed an applied critique of the religious worldview. As revealed in Méheust's unpublished essay, this had followed a process whereby "a little science took us away from religion, but a lot of science will bring us back to it." Jaurès condemned the betrayals of the Church and dreamed of going beyond the established religious forms to create a new cosmic religion based on a knowledge of Nature and perceived as the embodiment of the divine. Méheust's study is the first attempt to reconstruct the complete philosophy of Jaurès from his scattered texts after having articulated connections between ecology, the paranormal, and the sacred.

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A Tentative Synthesis

Toward a Mythical Liberation Movement?

Jean Poirier (1949) gave the name "mythical liberation movements" to the resurgence of collective imagination among defeated or subjugated people and it was developed by psychiatry historian Henri Ellenberger (1978) to combine social and paranormal revolt. Indeed, among such peoples living in a state of tension, "prophets may arise to revive these myths, proclaim them in a rejuvenated form, update them, arousing a collective enthusiasm whose consequences will be unpredictable" (Ellenberger, 1995, p. 449). He used the concept to collectively name the so-called *nativist*, *messianist*, *millenarian*, *mystical renovation*, and *revitalisation* movements.

Characteristics associated with these groups overlap with those of the anti-structural systems described by Hansen (2001) and environments depicted by Rudolf Otto (1995) as charismatic:

- **Psychological characteristics:** interest in the unusual and the wonderful; increased impressionability; a lack of objectivity and "distance" toward people and events; a tendency to see "signs" and "symbols" everywhere.

- **Social characteristics:** ease of migration, constitution of groups, horizontality of relations, and mistrust of people outside the group.

- **Institutional characteristics:** existence of a shaman, magician, prophet, etc., who is distinguished by something excessive or eccentric in his ideas and piety; by a certain attitude of defiance, a "madness," which exasperates his adversaries and arouses their contempt or their hatred, but in which the faithful see proof of his vocation.

- **Parapsychological characteristics:** testimonies of miraculous healings, prophecies, and visions.

The liberational myth crystallises agitation initially infused within a small, "calm and harmless" group of people, while the "movement" phase proper is associated with a brutal split between the faithful and the unbelievers. Ellenberger (1995, p. 456) describes two possible outcomes: "either the transformation of the 'movement' into an 'institution'

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fixed with its organization and its rites, or a sudden catastrophe which breaks the group and disperses its members."

In his description of these movements, Ellenberger gives no credit to the reality of parapsychological phenomena. He does not enter into the paradigm explored by Méheust via ufology and parapsychology, and by which myths have both cultural and natural facets. What may appear as "mythical" within this ethnopsychiatric reading remains dependent on a certain worldview that misses the vitality of these myths - myths which are truly embodied by miracles arousing cohesion within the movement.

Ellenberger nevertheless notes the conjunction of three factors: the activity of charisma-bearing individuals, a social effervescence, and systemic transformation. But while Ellenberger confines these reduced factors to conjectures upon the marginal movements of oppressed peoples, Méheust's work, based on that of Durkheim and Weber, generalises them to actual social revolutions.

From the Ecology of Anomalous Experiences to Political Ecology

A recent collectively written book edited by the anthropologist Jack Hunter, *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), developed links between ecology and parapsychology. The field of ecology, defined as the study of the relationship between living organisms and their physical environment, is a relatively new area of scientific research. One of its major concepts is that of the ecosystem, whereby all its elements are connected and related through networks of reciprocal exchange.

The most obvious intersection between ecology and parapsychology is the commonly reported after-effect of several different types of exceptional experience involving such things as near-death experiences, alien abduction, and psychedelic *trips*. In these the experiencer often comes away from their encounter with an enhanced sense of connection to their environment and the world around them (Ring & Elsasser-Valarino, 2006; Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017). The study of this rising "ecological consciousness" reveals another promising aspect of these experiences: a potential for individual transformation.

However, as Hunter has suggested, we should not examine parallels between ecology and parapsychology merely for the sake of exploring interesting intersections, "but for the essential task of contributing towards a much broader – *necessary* – change of perspective concerning our relationship to the living planet" (Hunter, 2019, p. 3). As such, it is particularly relevant to combine, as Méheust does, the study of sociology and politics in order to reveal the full dimensions of the intersection between parapsychology and

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ecology. The links examined by Méheust can be summarised and combined to provide a primary descriptive level of organisation along the following lines:

- The concept of an ecosystem, central to ecology, may be extended to the cosmic level since parapsychology demonstrates the possibility of non-local entanglement between all living systems and their physical environments.

- Ecology may be integrated with parapsychology because it is a transdisciplinary science, while parapsychology suggests ecology should integrate the concept of non-local entanglement with its observational and theoretical field.

- Psi may be understood in terms of a singularity where the usual laws of Nature are subverted, thereby revealing the existence of laws other than those governing material interactions alone.

- The favourable context for psi possesses the anti-structural characteristics described by the Hansen's Trickster theory. This can be seen both at the level of group dynamics (biotope) and among the bearers of charisma.

- Psi should not be understood in terms of stable and reliable signals generating and affecting powerful systems, but rather as an unstable and elusive process promoting transformation of a system and those other systems with which it communes. This definition corresponds with the Model of Pragmatic Information (MPI) defined by Walter von Lucadou (2015).

From this first descriptive level we may reinterpret the dynamics of social revolution by combining parapsychology and political sociology to construct the account below:

- Social effervescence and the energetic metaphor of overheating systems describe subtle connections between a system's separate elements and which prepare it for transformation. Although we cannot objectively quantify this effervescence, we may easily identify the various mechanisms inhibiting and preventing it from reaching a critical threshold.

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- Within these dynamics, there is systemic unity or coalescence between the individual and the collective: in other words, a correlation between local variables comprising a portion of the system and global variables describing the system as a whole.

- Charisma, myth, the sacred, and the paranormal are all invoked as essential dimensions of the process of kratophany and the manifestation of magical power but they differ from the institutional religious dimensions which subsequently succeed them in a hierophany that manifests in the form of religious structure.

During the present time when the most important anticipated social revolution is the one which would make it possible for humanity to resist the current ecocide, these different elements might combine in the following way:

- Parapsychology facilitates a liberating myth centring around a cosmic solidarity where everything in the world is interconnected, as is already evident at the level of individual paranormal experience. Ideas developed in the circles of animal magnetism fed social utopias in the nineteenth century that centred on the notion of solidarity. More recently, Nelson (2019) concluded that we are all interconnected following his Global Consciousness Project: this was a unique holistic experimental approach to psi, which conducted a 20-year scientific collaboration between researchers recording the effects of mass consciousness in response to major global events. So broad a perspective, and reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's noosphere and Lovelock's Gaïa hypotheses, surely invites us to ask: Should we finally consider psychic experience within its terrestrial ecosystem? The question is complicated by the disinclination of parapsychology as a scientific discipline to discuss religious, political, and social aspects of its subject matter.

- Bearers of charisma might play essential roles in the ecological transition by restoring the dimension of the sacred which has been removed from certain ecological currents because they are seen as a distraction from more concrete action (Jensen, Lier & McBay, 2018). The trickster-like characteristics of charisma bearers are a means of identifying them and understanding the ways they polarise and split social groups into followers

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and critics.

- There is no mundane solution to the ecological crisis that could save the sacred dimension. It is not sufficient merely to change the attitude of human beings toward nature, but to enter into a new vision where humankind supports the transition. Parapsychology, with its cosmic entanglement, offers a subversive vision of the relationship between human beings and their environment which would be fully compatible with a more harmonious participation within our ecosystem: that is, a meeting of the cosmic and the city.

- One of the most important obstacles identified by Méheust is the rearguard action of a "structuring" ecology employing the "sustainable development" oxymoron, which is presented as being compatible with current policies and scientific progress. But the expected changes can only really come through a "societal Big Bang" involving a transient "anti-structuring" device.

Conclusion

Throughout his entire corpus, Méheust establishes a new *rapprochement* between ecology and anomalistics revolving around a "socio-metamorphosis" combining the political, sociological and parapsychological. From past examples, Méheust anticipates the return of a myth that would activate, or even permit, rebellion against our current inaction in the face of ecological crisis. This myth of "cosmic solidarity," which combines the facts of ecology and parapsychology, offers an alternative version to the usual myths, which generally produce transcendent heteronomies of gods, spirits, and the supernatural. The myth of cosmic solidarity where "everything in the world is connected" refers to an immanence: as such, the paranormal is not supernatural, but is intrinsic to the vitality of the Earth and thus affirms that it is living human beings themselves who individually and collectively transform their world.

Méheust's multifaceted work is an engaging topic because it fertilises several often unexplored areas of thought: Beginning from parapsychology and ufology, what philosophical, ecological, political, sociological, and theological reflections can we produce? Since these fields still carry the stigma of being inferior sciences, if indeed they are admited to be sciences at all by the more conventionally minded, they have not received the attention they deserve (Kripal, 2010; Hunter, 2019). However, rethinking

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Jesus, rehabilitating Jaurès, constructing the planet's future – all such things might require us to take these more marginal routes.

One could argue that it is too early to draw conclusions from anomalous data owing to insufficient evidence. Yet Méheust (1999) opts for the principle of looking into the conceptual rearrangements to which these facts direct us when we admit, if only as a hypothesis, to their partial reality: "In my opinion, they are stronger than we say, and part of the fragility that we lend them comes from the desire that we have not to accept them as real" (Méheust & Evrard, 2007). It is the task of philosophy and anthropology "to make constructions, hypotheses, which go beyond reality to think otherwise" (*Idem*).

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Towards an ecology of suffering: How Late Antique martyrs' relationships with the natural environment shaped Christian religious identity: the Act of Shirin

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"Hagiographers were the anonymous architects of Christian communities in Iran"
(Payne, 2015, p. 19).

Introduction

To present the topic addressed in this contribution, I will first draw upon the Martyr Act of Polycarp,[1] an account written in the second half of the second century (Thompson, 2002, p. 27; Zwierlein, 2014, pp. 1-36) by a contemporary of the martyr (*Pass*. *Pol*. 22 [p. 18, 14/24]; Delehaye, 1921, p. 11) and considered to be the first Christian hagiographical text (Lake, 1992 [1913], p. 302). This story describes the capture, sentencing to death and execution by the Roman authorities of the Christian bishop Polycarp of Smyrna – modern Izmir, on the eastern coast of Asia Minor. Once Polycarp is captured, he is taken to the arena and condemned to death by fire (*Pass. Pol.* 11 [p. 10, 13/18]). As soon as the fire grows and the flames blaze up, an extraordinary event takes place (*Pass. Pol.* 15 [p. 14, 6/11]):

> [The flame] took the shape of a room, like a vessel's sail filled with wind, encircling the body of the martyr. He was inside not as burning flesh, but as bread that is being baked [οὐχ ὡς σάρξ καιομένη ἀλλ' ὡς ἄρτος ὀπτώμενος], or as gold and silver being melted in an oven. And we perceived such an aromatic scent, like the smell of incense or other valuable spices.

[1] Henceforth *Pass. Pol.* (ed. Musurillo, 1972, pp. 2-21). All translations are my own unless it is specified. The references are provided as in the Corpus Christianorum reference system, where the name of the text appears abbreviated in Latin, for example: *Pass. Sir.*, and it is followed by the number of the chapter. Then, the numbers in brackets correspond, first, to the number of the page and second, to the number of the line in the edition.

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The striking scene of Polycarp's death serves as a starting point for this contribution. The flame wraps around the body of the martyr, leaving it unharmed. The Roman authorities, seeing that his body could not be consumed by fire, finally commanded an executioner to stab him with a dagger (*Pass. Pol.* 16 [p. 14, 12/16]). The point here is how the fire leaves the body of the martyr undamaged and, ultimately, "even the entire crowd marvelled at such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect" (*Pass. Pol.* 16 [p. 14, 15/16]).

The relationship of the martyrs to the natural environment would later become a fundamental element of other hagiographical accounts. In these texts, martyrs and saints were said to be able to communicate with animals (among others, see Alakas & Bulger, 2020; Alexander, 2008; Crane, 2012; Hogbood-Oster, 2008; Obermeier, 2009; Salter, 2001, 2018), their power could bring protection – and, above all, pride and recognition – to entire geographical regions and features (among others, see Castelli, 2004; Molina Gómez, 2006, pp. 863-875; Payne 2011, 2015, pp. 59-92), and they could even control the natural elements and interact with weather phenomena (see Bieler, 1976 [1935], pp. 95-98; Kazhdan, 1995, pp. 75-76; Moorhead, 1981, p. 5; Pomer Monferrer, 2018; Pratsch 2005, pp. 270-289; Stathakopoulos, 2002).[2] On close examination, most of these scenes of interaction with nature occurred while the martyr was suffering, or recently dead. It is the interaction between the natural environment and suffering that this contribution aims to examine.

Description and objectives

This paper will present in a speculative way a perspective for studying literary representations of the nature-suffering mutuality. This approach will focus on how literary nature-human relations could display ideals and provocations to an audience's way of interpreting and experiencing their own natural environment. I will give examples of literary representations illustrating what I am calling "ecological interactions."[3] This notion will be used to bring forward the concept presented in the title of the paper: an *ecology of*

[2] See, for example, the well-known scene described by Prudentius after the death of Eulalia (*Perist.* 3, 176/179: "Inmediately the cold winter makes snow / fall and covers all the forum / at the same time it protects the body of Eulalia / that lies under the frozen sky / as a small linen blanket". Ed. Lavarenne (1963 [1951]).

[3] The concept of "ecological interactions" is taken from the metaphor used by Katrín Anna Lund and Karl Benediktsson (Lund & Benediktsson, 2010, p. 8) of "conversations with landscape" as a way of attending to the "mutuality of human-landscape encounters". This metaphor seeks to consider how natural environment and human beings both shape and articulate their relationship in a continuous interaction of recognition and affect. Thus, the notion of ecological interactions and the further notion of an ecology of suffering seek to acknowledge how the literary suffering of the martyrs both shaped and was shaped by its relation to environmental and non-human elements.

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suffering. An ecology of suffering allows us to understand early Christian hagiographic accounts, to examine how the range of literary interactions between martyrs' suffering and their natural environment was informed by early Christian understandings of nature, how they affected the way these communities identified, moved, and distributed themselves into their natural world and how these actions were informed by specific cultural, political, religious and natural contexts.

Approaching early Christian martyr texts: the *Passio* Shirin

This contribution aims to present a way not only of thinking *about* martyr texts, but also of *conceiving* martyr texts. However, although it is aimed at proposing a theoretical model of thinking about an ecology of suffering, it will apply its conceptualisations to a specific text: the *Passio* of Shirin.[4] This text (BHG 1637) was written around the beginning of the seventh century in Karka d-Beit Slok,[5] modern Kirkuk. The city of Karka was located in the plains of Northern Mesopotamia, approximately one hundred and eighty-six miles north of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the capital of the Sasanian Empire. This was the birthplace of Shirin, a noble young woman born into an aristocratic Zoroastrian family who, at the age of eighteen, announced publicly her conversion to Christianity. Her story is featured in a hagiographical text, written probably in the first decade of the seventh century. The Text (BHG 1637) narrates her birth, conversion to Christianity and her subsequent arrest and execution. This account is useful for the analysis of religious conflict between Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism during the end of the Sasanian Empire (fifth to seventh centuries).[6] The story, like all other hagiographical testimonies, uses various strategies to conduct the process of differentiating a Christian religious identity from others. One of the strategies this text employs, although subtle, allows us to present how an ecology of suffering works, and yet it has not been examined in the context of Christian hagiographical texts written in the Sasanian Empire more generally. These literary interactions, however, should not be interpreted from a modern perspective, as will be argued later. As Stephanie Cobb has clearly stated:

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[4] Henceforth *Pass. Sir.* (ed. Devos, 1946, pp. 112-131).

[5] I follow Richard Payne's (Payne, 2015) transliterations of Sasanian names.

[6] Paul Devos (1994, esp. pp. 11-13) has examined the ways this text presents the religious confrontations between Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Richard Payne (2015, esp, pp. 52-58) has shown how Shirin's conversion and following execution – along with other aristocratic converts of the period – is one sign of the integration that Christian communities experienced in imperial politics, challenging the notion of a strictly religiously-driven persecution among Christians.

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> Our reading [of the martyr texts] is dulled because we have no access to the ways our senses – sound, smell, sight – would have informed our understandings of the martyr stories […] The ancient audiences who listened to the martyr stories, therefore, are decidedly not us. They brought to their listening a cache of cultural experiences that we do not have access to but undoubtedly affected the ways they heard, responded to and imagined the martyr stories. As a group they were involved audibly and physically; they had something at stake in the texts they heard, interacting with and making meaning of them. When scholars, alone in their studies, read their critical editions, they in effect hit the mute button, surely dulling the dynamism of these stories in the early church and their emotional potential (Cobb, 2017, p. 11).

The scenes we are about to examine are not hard to see as continuous and bold attempts to describe a religious identity that was informed by an early Christian notion of nature: they served as a clear statement of the power that Christianity had over other religious identities and, above all, they asserted the competence that the Christian God had over the entire human experiential world.

Nevertheless, these are literary representations. Hagiographic studies have largely sought to separate historiographic "facts" from hagiographical "fantasy."[7] However, it is misleading to see in these texts the suffering bodies and, of course, the miracles they can achieve, as "a raw biological fact" (Bynum, 1991, p. 68).[8] Rather, in considering the complete variety of bodily representations – perceived and described pain, gender, emotions, and so on – as a set of literary dynamics more than irrefutable evidence of an historically true description of physical pain in Late Antiquity, the results we can achieve are far more compelling. I am here ascribing to Stephanie Cobb's (2017, p. 11) proposition of considering early Christian hagiographical accounts as separated from their alleged historical verisimilitude. By examining these texts' literary intentionality, rather than trying to dissect them in the search of historical truth: "These martyred bodies reveal ways early Christians constructed themselves vis-à-vis the world and their God" (Cobb, 2017, p. 12). Considering these texts in a literary realm means we can explore how the representations described in them were set and aimed for the audiences that later heard them.

To summarise, it would not be misleading to examine these texts as sources of recognition and frameworks of world building and experience-making. These texts

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[7] This perspective has mostly been encouraged by a scholarly line traced by the Bollandists. On this and bibliography, see: Cobb (2017, pp. 19-20).

[8] Cited in Cobb (2017, p. 11).

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prompted affective and sensory intensities in their audiences, intensities that both shaped and were shaped by the sociocultural, economic, and political constraints these accounts were written in. Regarding our text, clearly Shirin's story was composed to create an experiential response in the world of the community that heard it (*Pass. Sir.* 1, [p. 113, 1/7] *my own emphasis added*):

> But God, who, as a fellow of humans and in many ways, endows us with good judgment in the present moment, has considered well *to provoke our spirits* not only by means of written events, but also by the testimony of what has happened [εὐδόκησεν […] μὴ μόνον ἐκ τῆς τῶν γεγραμμένων ἱστορίας ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξ αὐτῆς τῆς τῶν πεπραγμένων αὐτοψίας τὴν ἡμετέραν προθυμίαν ἀνακαλέσασθαι], so that past actions are made credible by new ones and new deeds are illustrated by old ones.

How literary representations were aimed at shaping a worldview and a response to current events in Christian communities is fundamental in the analysis of these texts, rather than the analytical effort to find historical verisimilitudes or separate "reality" from "fiction." My aim is not to propose a way of thinking *about* these stories, but a way of *thinking with* these stories, that is: a disposition of understanding and analysing these texts as having an intention and prompting answers and conceptions in particular experienced worlds and contexts.

The text (BHG 1637)

Shirin was born into an aristocratic house in Karka d-Beit Slok. Her death occurred in the twenty-eighth year of Husraw I's reign (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113, 20]), that is, between the 12th of July of 558 C.E. and the 11th of July of 559 C.E. (Devos, 1946, p. 113 n. 1). This text is now preserved in Greek, being a compilation of previous accounts[9] composed by a fellow citizen of the martyr (Devos, 1994, p. 13). This account is only preserved in the *Codex Laurentianus* IX, 14 (2r.- 18v.), inside the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Regarding its date, the text itself does not provide specific data. There is a reference to Husraw II (r. 590-628), Husraw I's grandson, as being "now king of Persia" (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [p. 112, 5/6]) at the opening of the text. So, this text was written around the first decade of the seventh century.

[9] See, esp.: "Moses, Elijah and Peter the apostle and the other saints clearly appeared to her, as is told at length in other writings about her" (*Pass. Sir.* 13, [p. 121, 11/14]: καθάπερ τοῖς κατὰ πλάτος περὶ ἀυτῆς συγγεγραμμένοις ἐμφέρεται).

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Right after she was born, her father introduced her to the Zoroastrian religion (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113-114]). Shirin kept her conversion secret until she was eighteen, the age at which she was able to "distinguish good from evil" (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [p. 114, 17]),[10] and then publicly converted to Christianity. After her public apostasy, she was imprisoned by the Sasanian authorities (*Pass. Sir.* 10-16 [p. 118-124]), who moved her to Holwan, in the Zagros mountains. From there, she was taken to Dastagerd, near Ctesiphon, where the palaces and court of Husraw I (r. 531-579 C.E.) were located (Morony, 2006). In the city of Dastagerd she was sentenced to death (*Pass. Sir.* 22-23 [p- 127-128]) and, following an attempted rape (*Pass. Sir.* 25 [p. 129]), she died by strangulation (*Pass. Sir.* 26 [p. 129-130]). Her remains were thrown to the dogs and, intact, were later collected by Christians (*Pass. Sir.* 27 [p. 130]). Finally, her carcass was collected and deposited in the region of Beit Arbaye, near Beit Garmai (*Pass. Sir.* 28 [p. 130-131]).

Nature as an imprint of the divine.

The way early Christians observed and experienced nature was chiefly informed by the notion that nature was a divine creation (Molina Gómez, 2006, pp. 878-879):[11]

> La naturaleza sigue siendo una fuente de misterio a través de la cual se puede llegar a intuir la presencia de lo sobrenatural. Los escritores cristianos seguirán viendo en ella la huella de Dios. En este sentido, la contemplación de la naturaleza puede elevar el espíritu, y al igual que la lectura de la Biblia, es también un ejercicio de verdadera exégesis. La experiencia de la naturaleza conduce a la emoción y a la sensación de estar contemplando una obra divina.

Nature was the clear statement of a divine imprint that could be interpreted, just like the pages of the Scriptures, in an exegetical way. This interpretation gave rise to a remarkable notion: that nature had meaning. Christian authors, of course, and Christian communities in general, could infer that meaning and make sense of it in everyday acts and experiences. As David Wallace-Hadrill stated about the Early Church Father John Chrysostom:

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[10]The importance of personal reflection is persistent: “each one has the ability to distinguish what is advantageous” (*Pass. Sir.* 12 [p. 120, 13/14]) and: “my ability to think enabled me to surrender myself along with the Christians” (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 1]). See Devos (1946, p. 89).

[11] On this relation, see Biese (1888) and Wallace-Hadrill (1968). More recently, see Jones (2013); Molina Gómez (2006, pp. 876-880) and Robertson (2017).

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> Chrysostom's experience of vertigo as he stood on the sea shore led him to believe that nature has a significance and a meaning beyond what is immediately apparent, a significance which may be apprehended, as Chrysostom apprehended it, with frightening emotional intensity but vague definition, as a sudden awareness of the divine. The experience can then be subjected to reasoned analysis, a process which leads the fathers to the conclusion that nature is an ordered system from which must be inferred an ordering mind, namely God (Wallae-Hadrill, 1968, p. 101).

Early Christian communities experienced a natural world that was infused with divine traces. Saints and martyrs, moreover, by controlling and making use of their natural environment in their miracles, were the unambiguous sign of an ability to understand – and, above all, participate – in a divine work.[12] Nature-human relations, however, had not yet been addressed in this way in the so-called Oriental Martyr Acts – a category that contains Shirin's text and corresponds to the eastern Syrian and Greek hagiographical accounts.[13] Phillippe Gignoux (2000) has examined the literary traces, specially concerning New Testament parallels, between all kinds of miracles – not only nature-related ones – described in the Syrian Martyr Acts. In a systematic and useful analysis, Thomas Pratsch (2005, pp. 270-289) compiled a collection of literary formulae – *topoi* – concerning nature related miracles in the lives of the Greek Byzantine saints and showed how they served as a narrative statement of the power Christian saints had over the natural world. Examining nature related miracles in a monographic way, Dyonisos Stathakopoulos (2002) has compiled a typology of rain miracles present in the lives of Greek Byzantine saints. Juan José Pomer Monferrer (2018) has also gathered a collection of Byzantine hagiographical accounts concerning miracles related with fire.

However, this work aims to consider how this literary representation contributed to create culturally-, politically-, and religiously-driven ways of articulating, first, a way of being-in-the-world, second, an experience of the natural environment and, lastly, how this meaning helped to shape the definition of a religious identity in Northern Mesopotamia during the end of the Sasanian Empire. By considering this interaction, some issues arise:

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[12] Although it is out of the paper's scope, this understanding of nature also underlies Christian monastic experience. The conception that Christian *vitae* and developments of ascetism attributed to caves (Molina Gómez, 2006) and the desert (Goehring, 1999; 2012) were informed by an understanding of nature as the book where God's trace could be understanded and conceived. See the classical study of Dewas Chitty (Chitty, 1966) about monasticism in Egypt and Palestine.

[13] Edited in seven volumes by Paul Bedjan (Bedjan 1890-1897). Henceforth AMS. A Latin translation of some of these is provided by Assemani (Assemani, 1784) and a French translation by Frédéric Lagrange (Lagrange, 1852).

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Regarding this notion of nature in early Christian thought, how can we consider suffering in hagiographical accounts? This question will be addressed in the following section.

Methods: Or, a world of suffering

This section does not seek to question the various theoretical considerations of pain. Rather, it aims to consider how the presentation of suffering in martyr literature impacted the way early Christian communities approached the natural world and how it shaped their political, cultural, and religious way of acting. In considering pain in hagiographical texts, one fundamental issue arises: how did people think about pain and suffering in Antiquity? The topic will be addressed to introduce a framework for an ecology of suffering. This section considers nature-human relationships as an effect of early Christian understandings of pain. Therefore, it will be argued that experiences of pain were a locus of meaning for early Christianity and, as such, they were also informed by the notion previously described of a natural world infused with divine imprints. In this lens, ecological interactions are one of the many meanings and consequences that arose from the experience of pain as well as one of the many meanings that could be extracted from the notion of a divinely ordered nature. To address this idea, I will present one perspective that delves into the distinction between pain and suffering and describe how it cannot be attributed to late antique considerations of pain. I will then outline the value that Christian communities gave to collective pain and, finally, explain how late antique understandings of pain and its public meaning can set the foundation for an ecology of suffering.

In 1979, the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defined pain as "an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage."[14] The key here is the conflation of the sensory and emotional qualities of this experience. This working definition enabled a consideration of pain as a biopsychosocial experience, where various processes of cognition, affect, and culture were combined to form one cluster of human experience. However, some efforts have been made to create a distinction between pain and suffering by describing pain as operating in physical terms while, on the other hand, suffering works on the mental sphere. Eric Casell (1991, pp. 30-47) claimed that the relationship between pain and suffering was phenomenologically distinct. The key to this distinction lay in the ability of suffering to be "a threat to [the person's] continued existence – not merely to their lives but their integrity as persons" (Casell, 1991, p. 36). Suffering jeopardises a person's sense of wholeness and even the most salient features of

[14] Cited in Duffee (2019, p. 1). Van Dijkhuizen & Enenkel (2009, p. 1) ascribe to this definition.

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personhood are threatened by the experience of it. Casell (2011, p. 9) later developed this notion and pointed out that suffering was primarily a process that affected and emerged from persons, not bodies: "bodies do not suffer, only persons do […] Bodies have nociception and bodies may have neuroendocrine responses to emotional stimuli, but bodies do not have a sense of the future and bodies do not know meanings, only persons do."[15] This focus on the ability of persons – or the "mind" – to suffer can be readily understood as the distinction between physical and mental pain – a difference that David Morris dismissed and described as "the myth of two pains" (1991, p. 9ff). By making this distinction, Casell's perspective conceives a process of meaning-making following the physical signalling of the painful stimulus. In other words:

> Psychologists and trauma specialists describe pain as a sensation read by the brain, signalled by neurons (called nociceptors) firing in the body, called pain signalling. An individual's perception of this sensation, however – what psychologists call pain perception – is more complex, often dovetailing with emotional experiences, usually identified as suffering (Graham & Kilroy-Ewbank, 2018, p. 2).

However convenient this distinction may be, it is based on a dualistic conception of the body and a contemporary biological and medical approach to the body's experiences. Late Antique conceptions were obviously not informed by these perspectives. A distinction between a strictly physical response and a further mental interpretation rests on Cartesian informed ways of understanding the body that, simply, "the ancients knew nothing" about (Martin, 1995, p. 6). It would be deceptive to think that most of late antique communities, regardless of their religious identity, saw and thought about the experience of pain as being composed by two different parts that affected two discrete bodily entities, at least in the same way that we do.[16] Rather, what we find in early Christian thought is the soul's conflation with the body in painful experiences (Gonzalez, 2013).[17] As Antigone Samellas has noted: "it is indicative that from Hippocratic times till Late Antiquity the words that refer to bodily pain, ἀλγος, πόνος, ὀδύνη, λύπη, δῆξις, also denote psychic pain" (2015, p. 262). Medieval devotional writings, too, "made no

[15] But there are objections: Charlotte Dufee (Dufee, 2019) has argued namely against it and considers there is not a particular difference between both. Her critique is focused in the alleged need of noxious stimuli to create pain that Casell's theory defends –chronic pain or the case of "phantom limbs" dismantle this perspective and prove that pain can be created, still, without noxious stimuli–. However, this does not concern our analysis.

[16] For an examination of Aristotelian and Platonic dualism, see Bos (2002).

[17] Also, Tertullian *An.* 7,4; Augustine *Civ. Dei* 21, 3 and the detailed examination in Gonzalez (2013) of Tertullian's and Perpetua's conception of the soul and its corporeality.

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distinction between the physical and the spiritual anguish of Christ. All his pains are listed together as one total experience of the soul" (Cohen, 2000, p. 46). Therefore, there is no distinction between emotional and physical pain in early Christianity: together with what we currently interpret as suffering, it all formed part of one cluster of painful experience.

A fundamental concept stems from this explanation: the value that these communities attributed to pain. In her famous study, *The Suffering Self* (1995), Judith Perkins stated that "the discourse of the martyrs *Acts*, representing pain as empowering and death as victory, helped to construct a new understanding of human existence, a new 'mental set' toward the world that would have far-reaching consequences" (Perkins, 1995, p. 142). In spite of Elaine Scarry's well-known, and largely contested,[18] notion of the inability of pain to be expressed (Scarry, 1985, p. 25ff.), martyr texts depict a world in which suffering operated as a locus of meaning and an experience that could easily be transmitted. This ability of being expressed created new ways for the audience to get involved in the world they inhabited. Pain in Early Christianity also had an individual and private component, but "it was the experience of pain in its public, visible and common aspects that was deemed especially grievous" (Samellas, 2015, p. 261). It is this collective component of the depiction of suffering that is fundamental for the understanding of an ecology of suffering. In a more general way, "by establishing certain acceptable ways for Christians to interpret what they perceive," states Diane Fruchtman, "early Christian authors provided tools essential for the definition and maintenance of a community, and, therefore, essential to Christianization – by which I mean the development of a unique and bounded Christian identity" (Fruchtman, 2014, p. 131). Our text, indeed, is concerned with how the literary depictions of the events could spark future happenings (*Pass. Sir.* 1 [p. 113, 9/19]):

> As certain Christians are committed to the constant search for good, continually seeking the ideal of virtue, and have wished to have the struggles that have taken place before our eyes written down and generally adapted to the needs of all [πρὸς ὠφέλειαν τοῖς πᾶσι], with the aim of forming a proper memory as well as a knowledge of what is to come.
>
> However, we will not relate the deeds of a man [ἀνδρός], or the exploits of one who has been promoted by the divine commandments, but the achievements of the female nature [γυναικείας φύσεως κατορθώματα] and the exploits of a youth raised in heathen impiety [Ἑλλενική δυσσεβείᾳ], which are not at all inferior to the battles of the preceding ones. For neither has the

[18] See, more recently, Smadar Bustan's (Bustan, 2016) critique and references.

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> weakness of nature [ἀσθένεια φύσεως] harmed it, nor has youth volatilised her thoughts or triggered them in vain.

Having presented these notions, how can we think of an ecology of suffering in hagiographical accounts? The representation of suffering martyrs and their interaction with the natural environment, informed by the Christian understanding of nature, created and shaped the ways that Christian communities approached and experienced their own natural environments. Just as our text stated that Shirin's acts, in a general way, provided tools for Christians to act in their cultural contexts, the literary depictions of suffering martyrs and the natural environment prompted in the audience a particular ideal of how they should understand and experience the natural world around them. An ecology of suffering, by its focus on the inextricability of pain and suffering, the emphasis on the collective component of martyrs' deaths, and the notion that early Christian relations with nature were permeated by a divine imprints, helps to understand how martyr texts could trigger a way of experiencing a specific cultural, political, natural, and religious milieu.

From text to context

I have stressed that an ecology of suffering is a culturally informed way of perceiving the world. As such, it responds to the political, cultural, chronological, and religious milieu in which it is embedded. This section will highlight certain features of the ways that Christian communities lived and developed their religious identity at the end of the Sasanian Empire.

Ardashir I proclaimed himself king of kings of the new empire, the last of pre-Islamic Iran, after the fall of the Arsacids in 224 (Dignas & Winter, 2012 [2007]. P. 18ff; Payne, 2015, pp. 6-10). The new power, *Eranshahr* "Empire of Iran," extended over the territories in the east of the Arabian Peninsula, from Egypt, the Levant, and the Caucasus to Bactria (Mackenzie, 2011). The Sasanians continuously held and lost these geographic areas until 622 (Dignas & Winter, 2012 [2007], p. 118), and the Empire's fall in 650 at the hands of the Arabs (Shahbazi, 2005). The vast territories and cultural variety were agglutinated under the figure of the king of kings and a single religion: Zoroastrianism. However, the religious landscape seems to be far from homogeneous. The beginnings of Christianity in Sassanid territory and its implications are still subject to discussion due to the lack of evidence. In a general frame, what seems initially to be evident is the alleged religious intolerance of power structures towards foreign religions: in the relief of Naqsh-e Rajab, about three kilometres north of Persepolis, carved in the 3rd century, the priest Kardir, under King Shapur I, proudly proclaims the subjugation of the non-Zoroastrian

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communities to the Empire (ed. Skjaervø 2012: lines 11/12).[19] Another nearby relief, in Naqsh-e Rustam, depicts King Ardashir I riding a horse and receiving a diadem directly from the hands of Ahura Mazda in human form. Matthew Canepa (Canepa 2013: 863), about this and other reliefs, states:

> In this and later reliefs the primary symbol of authority and power is a diadem […] Relief 1 at Naqsh-e Rustam was likely the last relief that Ardashir I carved and it presents a highly innovative and powerful composition that elegantly and forcefully proclaims the early, developing Sasanian ideology of divinely inspired kingship and irresistible victory.

However, these early depictions of a persecutor "state" that tried to oppress and destroy other religious identities, such as Judaism or Christianity, must be examined with some caveats. Later evidences, such as the *Synodicon Orientale* – an important compilation of the synods and canons held by the Church of the East between the year 410 and the end of the eight century[20] - show the complete integration into imperial politics that Christian communities experienced. Lee Patterson emphasizes the political dimensions of these persecutions and defends: "Whatever personal piety the kings may have felt, their use of religion was informed by the realities arising from their relations with the nobility and from their frontiers, especially the Roman," and continues: "Both Zoroastrianism and Christianity served the kings well, and when they did not the kings took measures that one should hesitate to regard as indications of their religiosity" (Patterson, 2017, p. 193). In general, we should hesitate to regard these alleged persecutions as direct signs of religious oppression. Rather, they implied the integration of Christians into imperial politics and how they implied a threat to the exertion of power in the Sasanian court. It is interesting to note how hagiography became a useful tool for Christian communities in this context (Payne, 2015, p. 55):

> Purges, assassinations, and other extrajudicial killings were basic instruments of rule for the Sasanians throughout their history […] Zoroastrians were if anything more likely to fall victim to violence than adherents of other religions, simply because the more power they accrued, the more likely they were to threaten royal authority. The difference between Christian and Zoroastrian victims was the former's access to literary specialists well versed in the arts of martyrology, who could transform executed nobles into valiant aristocratic martyrs […] Although

[19] See also Mackenzie (1989).

[20] Ed. Chabot (1902).

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> anti-Christian language doubtless colored these executions, they should not be extracted from the political context in which the hagiographers placed them.

Our text is not alien to its chronological and political context. Between 561 and 562 Sassanian and Byzantine ambassadors signed a peace treaty after a period of territorial disputes (Blockley, 1985, pp. 54-75; Bonner, 2019, pp. 207-212; Dignas & Winter, 2007 [2007], pp. 138-148; Panaino, 2012,p. 69).[21] The surviving document in Greek is given by Menander the Guardsman – a Greek and Christian author.[22] According to him, thirteen clauses were made, that were especially aimed at containing territorial disputes. After a detailed explanation of the terms, "apart [ἐκτὸς]," a brief appendix was written "concerning the situation of the Christians in Persia [τὰ περὶ τῶν ἐν Περσίδι Χριστιανῶν]" (fr. 6. 1, 398). The terms imposed on the Sasanians are surprisingly scarce and loose if we consider the situation described by hagiographical testimonies of that period – as in that of Shirin, who had to die only two years before this treaty was signed – freedom of worship, freedom in the construction of temples and, above all, abstention from proselytist action on both sides (fr. 6. 1399-1407). The fact that these demands form an appendix may give a hint of the condition of Christian communities in the context in which our text was written. The vagueness of the terms seems to respond to an almost propagandistic use by both parts, where a moral commitment on behalf of the leaders was expected rather than a behaviour regulated by legal dictates (Panaino, 2012, p. 84). Nor does the security of Christians in Sasanian territory seem to occupy a prominent place on the Roman diplomatic agenda, at least concerning Justinian's control of the Church of the East (Blockley, 1985, p. 259 n. 67). On the other hand, the fact that the variety of Christian doctrines is not specified, and that no reference is made to the Church of Persia, gives the impression that, for the Church of the West, "only one form of Christianity was acceptable, and that the other variants were simply heresies" (Panaino, 2012, p. 84). Shirin's text, probably, refers to the conditions that preceded this treaty and points out how the Zoroastrian authorities deported the martyr so as not to break the agreement (*Pass. Sir.* 17 [p. 124, 15/18] *my own emphasis*):[23]

> After Saint Shirin spent no short time in prison and with the departure of the Roman ambassador to her own land, the *Magi,*[24] fearing that a royal order would appear to free her [δεδιότες οἱ μάγοι μήπως βασιλικήν ἀνοίσῃ κέλευσιν ἀπολῦσαι

[21] I would like to thank Dr. Álvarez-Pedrosa for making this available to me.

[22] Ed. Blockley (1985).

[23] Devos (1994, p. 26 n. 22) also connects this scene to the Peace Treaty of the year 561.

[24] The name given to Zoroastrians.

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> αὐτήν], resolved to send her to the king's residence before the ambassador's arrival.

Also, regarding the time of the composition, the hagiographer states that "it is convenient for me to omit [how the martyr was baptised] due to the current situation" (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 124, 8]: χρ̣ε̣σιμως παρέρχομαι διὰ τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν κατάστασιν).

Karka, the city where Shirin was born, was the capital of the region of Beit Garmai, a geographic area in Northern Mesopotamia surrounded by and in close contact with the cities of Arbela and Nisibis. This region, although not having the same economical and cultural weigh as the southern metropolis of Ctesiphon, or the province of Khuzestan, had religious significance in the shaping of Christian communities in Sasanian territory (Wood, 2013, p. 27). All over the region, martyr shrines[25] and martyr stories were created to help the definition of a religious identity. Most importantly: "In places such as Nisibis, Arbela, and Karka de Beth Slouq [*sic*], the ruins of antiquity may have encouraged imagined connections with the extinct empires of the past" (Wood, 2013, p. 27). Texts as *The History of Karka*[26] – written around the year 600 (Payne, 2012, p. 205), the same period as Shirin's story was composed – connected the foundation of the city to Assyrian, Seleucid and Achaemenid kings, and helped to position Karka as the predominant centre of political, cultural, and religious identification for Christian communities in Northern Mesopotamia. In the city of Arbela, *The History of Mar Qardagh,*[27] another hagiographical account, traced the origin of its saint to Assyrian kings and nobility. This kind of historical imagination helped to define and legitimise a Christian presence in these territories and support Christian aristocratic positions of power. As Richard Payne has stated:

> These hagiographers enlisted physical vestiges of the past they evoked to underpin their historical claims […] The *History of Karka* and the *History of Mar Qardagh* […] harnessed the power of a ruinous landscape –the tell, wall and civic monuments of Karka and a fortress on the outskirts of Arbela – spatially to support their narrative claims on behalf of the antique grandeur of their cities and their noble inhabitants, an application of the ancient past to the representation of Christian community with significant implications for discussions of social identity in the Late Sasanian Empire (Payne, 2012, pp. 205-206).

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[25] For a recent archaeological survey of a church near Karka, see Amen Ali (2008).

[26] AMS II, ed. Bedjan (1891, pp. 507-535). Tr. Hoffmann (1880, pp. 43-60). A classical study of this text is offered by Jean Maurice Fiey (Fiey 1964).

[27] Ed. Abbeloos (1890). Tr. Walker (2006).

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Finally, Shirin's aristocratic descent is well attested in our text (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 113, 24/29]), and Karka also appeared in Christian imagination as "subject to the last (alleged) mass persecution commemorated in hagiography, in the reign of Yazdegard II" (Wood, 2013, p. 27), that took part between the years 438-458. As such, a vast number of Christian worshippers gathered annually at the outskirts of Karka to commemorate the executions (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [123, 29/36; 124, 1/4]). This process similarly took place in Arbela, where Christian communities congregated outside the city, around of the tell of Melqi, where the saint Mar Qardagh was executed (see Walker, 2006-2007). Christian communities appropriated physical remnants of the past and geographical regions to later imbue them with Christian significance. This historical process can also be relevant to our understanding of an ecology of suffering, as it reveals a specific appreciation of natural environments and shows how Christian perspectives on nature informed this act by attributing a collective meaning to physical places as the vestiges of suffering.[28]

Of pits, light, and divine signs: towards an ecology of suffering

Nature-human relations in early Christianity, as has been previously argued, were prompted by an understanding of nature being a by-product of divine intervention in the world. Martyrs and saints were, from this perspective, the ones who could interact with and understand the divine traces of their environment. After laying the framework for thinking of an ecology of suffering when approaching martyr texts, this last section will serve as a case study for applying it.

Before expanding on the notion of how Shirin's account can reflect an ecology of suffering, it is important to understand how our text conceives of the natural environment. In the scene before her execution, the main priest [τὸν ἀρχίμαγον], asked the martyr about the reasons she abandoned the Zoroastrian religion (*Pass. Sir.* 20 [p. 126, 8/11]). Shirin's answer is quite self-explanatory (*Pass. Sir.* 20 [p. 126, 11/23]):

> But she answered him confidently [ἑτοιμώς], saying, "Where is the crown of the former kings and the glory of the rulers? All these disappear with the one who has achieved them, and like the garden that blooms for a short time, they disappear and suffer an unworthy death, because they have not recognised the true

[28] Due to the extension of this work, I cannot refer at length to how this process was conducted in other geographical regions of the Sasanian Empire. Equally interesting is how the death of Pethion and Anahid (AMS 2, ed. Bedjan [1891, pp. 559-631]) contributed to create a significant shrine for the cult of the martyrs in Mount Behistun, a mountain with a long stablished sacred and political meaning for Zoroastrians. For an extensive examination, see Richard Payne's analysis (Payne 2015, pp. 59-92). For an English translation of Anahid's death, see Harvey & Brock (1987, pp. 82-99).

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> demiurge [τὸν ἀληθινόν δημιουργὸν ἀγνοήσαντες], nor have they obeyed the master of life and death [τὸν τῆς ζωῆς καὶ θανάτου δεσπότην]. Instead, they have worshipped created things [κτίσματα],[29] and have estimated the fire, the water, the moon, and the sun together with the other stars. While Christians, though unfortunate in the present world [ἐν τῳ παρόντι κοσμῳ], will enjoy eternal life in the future, and by depriving them of earthly glory, you will offer them heavenly life.

The opposition is made clear by Shirin: Zoroastrians worship [σεβασθέντες] "created things," and estimate [τιμήσαντες] natural elements such as "the fire, the water, the moon, and the sun together with other stars." Contrary to this, appears the "true demiurge," the Christian God, "master of life and death." The distinction is clear: Zoroastrians have established a relation of veneration with their experiential environment.[30] This relation is hierarchical and, therefore, in Shirin's conception, less esteemed. Being an almost material conception, Zoroastrians lack the future reward that Christians would get. On the other hand, Shirin presents an abstract view of Christianity, where its relation to the natural environment is completely horizontal.

This notion is fundamental for understanding this section. Here, the scenes that will be examined present a notion of nature where its relation with the martyr is completely horizontal and helpful. After Shirin's public apostasy, the *rad* – a political office that held judicial power at a provincial level (Brock & Harvey, 1987, p. 96; Devos, 1946, p. 97)[31] – outraged, sends some of his people over to the martyr asking the reasons for her conversion (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 23/25]). They also warned her that "if she [continued] pursuing this belief [Christianity], she will expose herself to numerous tortures, while if she [embraced] again the previous conditions of the *Magi*, she will be rewarded with royal honours" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 121, 26/29]). After Shirin's eloquent and bold refusal to re-adopt Zoroastrianism (*Pass. Sir.* 14, [p. 121, 31/34; p. 122, 1/9]), she was imprisoned, chained at her feet and hands, and deprived of food and drink for three days and three nights (*Pass. Sir* 14 [p. 122, 9/14]). Shirin is then thrown to a pit (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 122, 17/19]: λάκκος) with her hands and feet tied, and even more weigh on her chains. After

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[29] *Cfr.* 3Mac 15, 11; Mc 10, 6.

[30] On the understanding of their natural world, specially their understanding of animals, see Macuch (2003) and Moazami (2005).

[31] The text also explains this figure: "Since the *rad* –that was the name of an important authority among the Persians– had returned from his travels…" (*Pass. Sir.* 13, [p. 121, 18/20]). Nevertheless, in the Greek text appears *dar* [δάρ], a graphic mistake, according to Devos (1946: 97; 121 n. 2), because of the similarity of the letter r [ܪ] and the letter d [ܕ] in the Syriac script. It is also necessary to question the reason of this explanation, since such an important political position could not go unnoticed by the inhabitants within the borders of the Empire. Perhaps, the author was writing to address an audience outside the Sassanian sphere?

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that, the guards decide to dig another pit, even narrower this time, and "filled with humidity and pestilent fumes" (*Pass. Sir.* 15 [p. 122, 29/30]). The scene, quoted at length, is this (*Pass. Sir.* 15 [p. 122, 31/35; p. 123, 1/14]):

> Thrown there and left to die by the fumes emanating from it, she had a divine vision, as the Babylonian children in the furnace. Immediately the heat of the pit turned into freshness,[32] and a divine light shone throughout the hole, and the chains on her hands and feet suddenly collapsed.

So dangerous was the pit that the Christians were worried that she would not be able to recover. So the bishop of the region, together with his clergy and all the people, offered prayers and supplications to God for her reassurance, so that she would carry out the struggle without complaints. At dawn, when some of those belonging to the church approached the grave and perceived light instead of darkness, instead of the pestilential fumes, a growing breeze of roses, and again the complete liberation from the chains, they let the congregation know that, instead of the previous unrest, [there was] tranquillity, and everyone was filled with joy and happiness instead of pain [ἀντὶ λύπης].

All the dangerous elements are transformed into positive, non-harmful aspects related to nature: the heat is replaced by freshness, the deadly fumes become a pleasant breeze of roses, and the darkness of the pit is now a divine light. Another extraordinary event occurs after Shirin is taken out of the cave (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 123, 20/24]): "on that very day, a heavy rain fell and mitigated the stifling sun, and all those whose souls had not been blinded recognized the way in which God had honoured his servant."[33]

Of course, these transformations were informed by a specific Christian understanding of nature, as the association of God with light and Godlessness with darkness is ubiquitous in Christian thinking.[34] At the beginning of the story, after describing her birth in a Zoroastrian family, the hagiographer also states (*Pass. Sir.* 2 [p. 114, 9/13]):

> We have exposed this about her, not in an effort to lengthen the story, but because we want to show in what darkness and in what way she was imprisoned and

[32] A biblical reference to Dn (3, 49-50).

[33] On rain miracles, see Stathakopoulos (2002), and Pratsch (2005: 275-276).

[34] See, for example, in the Hebrew Bible Ex 13, 21-22 as a column of light guides the people of Israel through the desert. In the New Testament, light is also attributed to Christ through God: "For God, who said: 'let light shine out of darkness' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4, 6) or the words of Jesus: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (Jn 8, 12). Ed. Alan, Karavidopoulos, Martini & Metzger (2012)

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> captured and how she approached the light of truth by her own and escaped the devil's wiles.

My purpose, however, is not to explain how these symbols appear in other accounts. Rather, I am addressing how the literary representation of these natural elements was intentionally aimed at embracing an experiential understanding of natural elements for the audiences that first heard these stories. These scenes were informed by cultural parameters, but they impressed upon them too: hagiographers created a culturally acquainted way to talk about and perceive their surroundings. By doing this, they demarcated a Christian identity from others. Literary representations of light and darkness were not mere literary symbols or *topoi*, they were ways of prompting ideals and provocations that could later be used by the audiences to express themselves and act in their own cultural, political, natural and religious context.

This notion is obvious and does not provide much deeper understanding of early Christian nature-human relations. However, it is important to address a richer level of understanding by noting that these events took place because God was willing to help the martyr. In Shirin's story, the supernatural phenomena do not occur by the martyr's willing. Rather, she is always a passive recipient for God's tests. This idea is important to note because these supernatural phenomena are described as *signs* [σημεῖα] (*Pass. Sir.* 16 [p. 123, 24]). As Thomas Pratsch has noted, although in a general way in the New Testament Jesus' actions are mostly perceived as *miracles* [δυνάμεις] (ex. Mt 13, 58), these supernatural phenomena are distinguished from divine signs [σημεῖα] in the way that they do not depend upon the agency of the saint or martyr, rather, they are completely dependent on God's action upon the human world:[35]

> Im engeren Sinne sind Zeichen der Heiligkeit jedoch wunderbare Erscheinungen bzw. übernatürliche Phänomene, die aber - im Unterschied etwa zu den Wundern - nicht auf eine Aktivität, einen Wunsch oder Willen des Heiligen zurückgehen, sondern direkt von Gott bewirkt werden, der selbst diese Zeichen setzt und damit die Heiligkeit des betreffenden Menschen anzeigt (Pratsch, 2005, p. 213).

This notion of divine agency is fundamental for understanding Shirin's account. The text reminds us that "God showed that it was not out of weakness that He allowed those who feared Him to be tested, but that He wanted the love for Him to be verified" (*Pass. Sir.* 14 [p. 122, 20/22]). The entire account is filled with references to God's orchestrated plan to verify Shirin's faith. In a previous scene, the Devil [ὁ διάβολος] appears to Shirin and

[35] See also Pratsch (2005: 216 n. 12) for an account of examples concerning divine signs of light.

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blames her for rejecting the family tradition and asking the Christian priest of the city to baptise her (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 20/26]). Shirin's spirit is strong, and "recognizing the diabolic energy [διαβολικὴν ἐνεργείαν]" (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 26/27]), she endures the other's rhetorical trickery. The Devil even declares to be God himself (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116, 30/31]) in an attempt to mislead the martyr. This striking scene, as the hagiographer later admits, was fully devised to assess Shirin's steadiness (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 117, 3/7]):

> God permitted this to happen, wanting to test her spirit and attempting to present her with the evil and knavery of the other, and to make her immune to his wiles, so that she would never again fall prey to his deceitful words.

Hence, it is God's will to transform the harmful situations and help the martyr. As the experiential world existed as a book to be read and comprehended by the faithful, it is inferred, then, that by these tests, the ones more closely related to God – martyrs and saints – could obtain a better knowledge of and relation to the world surrounding them. These literary depictions of the aid provided by God served to encourage a particular way of being-in-the world and understanding nature-human relations for Christian communities.

One last point: the recurrent encounters with the Devil (*Pass. Sir.* 6 [p. 116]; 16 [p. 124, 1/4]; 25 [p. 129]) as means of putting to a test the conviction and faith of the martyr are the evidence of Shirin's steadiness and strength obtained through faith. Shirin is also thrown into a pestilent, dark, and mortal cave, but she endures the suffering for three days and three nights. The point I am trying to make here is that the emphasis on Shirin's discovery of light and endurance might also be a reference to an ascetic ideal that the hagiographer tried to invoke. The references to caves or close natural cavities have predominance in ascetic Christian writings (Benz, 1954). As Origen wrote (*Con. Cel.* 51), it was believed that Jesus was conceived in a cave. The cave symbolized something unknown and dangerous, and it also served as a trial for saints to demonstrate their spiritual strength (Athanasius *Vita Ant.* 61. 73, 89; Rufinus *Hist. Mon.* 17). Sometimes, as in Shirin's account, these places were malign and unknown, evil and dangerous – see, for example, Nicephorus's *Vita* (BHG 1335. 148, 4/9) – but they also served as the prelude and preparatory stage for the return of light and safety (BHG 1335. 148, 14/23). Shirin's efforts are also described in her insistence on ascetic ideals. By (*Pass. Sir.* 3 [p. 114, 21/25]):

> [Abandoning] the group of important women, she distanced herself from the company of young and well-groomed men [πλουτοκομῶντας]. Instead, she

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> appreciated the company of those who, albeit being poor in life [πρὸς τὰς εὐτελεῖς μὲν τῷ βιῷ], cared for the customs, and she endeavoured to make them her family and friends.

The hagiographer insists in her sexual abstinence (*Pass. Sir.* [p. 115, 2/3]) and tells how Shirin decided:

> Not to give herself to a man or to worry about earthly cares [ταῖς βιωτικαῖς […] μερίμναις], to the extent of avoiding people's gaze and hiding the beauty of her body, weakening herself in fasting and other torments, and sometimes throwing dust in her eyes.

This insistence on Shirin's attitudes, together with the ideas previously described, could be a sign of the author's intention to represent ascetic ideals and provocations for the audience.

Conclusion

How can these events be related to the notion of an ecology of suffering? To sum up, the scenes described in Shirin's story were driven by a culturally informed way of understanding and experiencing nature: in their efforts to differentiate Christianity from other religious identities, Christian communities created an understanding of nature in which every natural element was infused with an imprint of the divine. Saints and martyrs, by their closeness to God, could understand and, above all obtain benefit and help from these elements.

By examining Shirin's account, we can observe how supernatural events were all understood as signs of God's willing to help His martyr at times of suffering and distress. An ecology of suffering, therefore, tries to conceive a way of examining these stories by understanding the notion of suffering in Late Antiquity and its relation to nature. Pain was a locus of meaning: martyr texts presented literary bodies that informed and provoked the ways Christians identified themselves and moved in certain chronological, political, cultural, and religious contexts. As a meaning-making device, pain could be attached to other culturally informed notions, such as nature. By associating suffering to nature, martyr texts were presenting specific ideals and provocations to their audience that they could later use in their self-understanding as communities and in their experience of the natural environment. Finally, some more questions arise, as these texts were specific to their contexts, how is this notion going to be presented in other accounts? Moreover, is

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the understanding of nature going to change alongside changes in the understanding of pain, or vice versa?

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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.[1] 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

[1] 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.[2]

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.[3] Jenkins notes, "Both nature and humanity "concreate," making composites out of form and matter, and both presuppose in their making the creation of God."[4] 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.[5]

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

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

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

[5] 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.[6]

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[7] 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.[8]

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[6] Cronon: 8.

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

[8] 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."[9]

Mourrisseau takes a departure from the foundation of western consensus reality[10] 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."[11]

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

[10] 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.

[11] 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."[12] 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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[12] 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.[13]

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.

[13] 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.[14]

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.[15]

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?"[16] 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,"[17] which also happens to be the founding story of my hometown

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

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

[16] Harrison.

[17] 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.[18]

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

[18] 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[19] 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

[19] 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.[20]

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."[21]

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.[22]

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

[21] Vico.

[22] 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."[23] 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."[24] 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."[25]

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

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

[24] Vico.

[25] 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."[26] 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"[27] 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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[26] Harrison.

[27] 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."[28]

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,

[28] 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."[29]

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."[30]

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."[31]

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

[29] Harrison.

[30] Vico.

[31] Harrison.

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Indigenous thought systems to produce transformative curricula.[32] 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."[33] 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.[34]

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."[35] 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.)"[36]

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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[32] 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.

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

[34] Tarnas: 24.

[35] Dumont: 31.

[36] 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.[37] 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

[37] 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.'[38] 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)

[38] 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.[39]

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

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Madoodiswan as Sacred Maternal Pedagogy

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Maajitaadaa (An Introduction)

To begin, I want to talk about Anishinaabeg traditional ecological knowledge and its relationship to the women's sweatlodge ceremony. I also want to talk about a maternal ecological pedagogy that arises from the practice of the Anishinaabeg women's madoodiswan (sweatlodge ceremony). My hope is that we begin to see the connections between spiritual ecological knowledge, ceremony and pedagogical practice. The role of all three is the foundation of my identity as an Anishinaabe-kwe and mother. I share in this paper an Anishinaabeg story and recollections pertaining to a sweatlodge vision (*bawaajigan*) I had many years ago relating to womanhood and motherhood. The story of the vision acts as the foundation for exploring the dynamics and complexities of Anishinaabe-kwewag understandings of ecology in connection to land, ceremony, womanhood, motherhood, teaching, learning, and knowledge creation. This paper advocates for the reclamation and resurgence of Anishinaabeg women's traditional ecological knowledge in the face of hundreds of years of cultural genocide and colonization. Further, it opens a dialogue to share the nature of Indigenous women's traditional ecological knowledge, but also to nurture a generation of women that have the abilities, knowledge, and values of their ancestral grandmothers to reclaim women's ecological ways of living and being on the land.

Anishinaabekwe's Journey to the 'Other Side of the Stars'[1]

Anishinaabekwe prepares for the *madoodiswan*.[2]

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[1] The 'Other Side of the Stars' is a phrase or line that comes from a poem by Anishinaabeg scholar and Elder Basil Johnston-*ba*. Ba or ban meaning someone who has passed away. See, Basil Johnston. 1987. *Ojibway Ceremonies*, 1982. Toronto: McClelland Stewart, p. 51.

[2] *Madoodiswan* means sweat lodge.

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It is *dagwaagin*.[3]
The evening air is cool, and the forest is dark.
Aki[4] is cold on and damp on bare feet.

Anishinaabekwe stands waiting to enter the madoodiswan.
She listens to the stories of the first sweatlodge.
Then they usher her inside the doorway.
"Boozhoo Gizhew-Manidoo!" Anishinaabekwe greets the Creator
"Boozhoo Aki!" Anishinaabekwe greets the land.
"Boozhoo anikoobijiganag!" Anishinaabekwe greets the ancestors.
She enters the lodge.
It is dark.
Moving left around the perimeter of the inside she finds her spot and sits.
Crossed legs touching the knees of the two women on either side.
Forming a sacred circle of women.
A chain of relations.

The nookomisag and mishoomisag enter the lodge.
They are placed in a deep pit in the middle.
"Boozhoo *nookomisag*[5]!" Anishinaabekwe greets the grandmother stones.
"Boozhoo *mishomisag*[6]!" Anishinaabekwe greets the grandfather stones.
We offer them the *mashkikiwan*[7].

By the end of the ceremony, there will be seven *asiinig*[8] brought into the lodge.

One for each of the directions, *waabanong,*[9] *zhaawanong*,[10] *ningaabii'anong*,[11] and *giiwedinong*,[12] one for the sky, one for the earth and one for the Creator.

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[3] *Dagwaagin* means autumn, fall.
[4] *Aki* translates to the Earth.
[5] *Nookomisag* means grandmothers.
[6] *Mishoomisag* means grandfathers.
[7] *Mashkikiwan* means plant medicines in this context.
[8] *Asiinig* means stones.
[9] *Waabanong* refers to the eastern direction.
[10] *Zhaawanong* refers to the southern direction.
[11] *Ningaabii'anong* refers to the western direction.
[12] *Giiwedinong* refers to the northern direction.

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The first round begins.
We honor and pray for the Grandfathers, Grandmothers and the Creator.
Waves of heat smash into her like waves on a shoreline; one after the other.
The sound of copper rattles fill the lodge. Clang! Clang! Clang!
The sound of voices raised in song.
The sound of the Little-Boy Water Drum sends a beat like a heart deep through time and space.
It calls out to the ancestors to come and join the circle.
"Join us! Join us!"

She feels them come into the lodge.
Wisps of light start to dance in.
They sit in between the women.
"Boozhoo, nindaanikoobijiganag[13]!" Anishinaabekwe calls out in greeting.
The lodge walls seem to expand outwards to accommodate the many visitors.

A star falls through the lodge ceiling towards her from above.
Then another.
And another.
Stars begin to pour in like water through a leaky hole in a roof.
Soon the whole lodge is filled with stars.
Anishinaabekwe can't see anything except stars now.

The lodge bends and morphs.
Anishinaabekwe reaches for the ground, trying to find an anchor.
The land begins to let go, but she hangs on to her like a child grasping for their mother's hand.
"Let go!" the ancestors whisper to her.
She lets go.
She does not feel the ground below her anymore.
Carried on a wave of stars falling from above, she is transformed and transported over the stars.

She is floating in a black lake of stars.

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[13] *Nindaanikoobijiganag* means my ancestors, but it can also mean my future descendants or those spirits yet to arrive on earth that still exist in the realm of the Spirits.

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Anangoog.[14]
Stars above her.
Stars below her.
Stars behind her.
Stars in front of her.
Stars all around her.

She floats in peace and quiet.
She feels cool, a relief from the hot rocks.
She is an abinoojiinyens[15] floating in mide-waaboo[16].
She hears a drum beat, a heartbeat strong and steady.
Then she hears the women again.
Voices under water.
What are they saying? I don't understand.
Songs.
Women's songs calling me back.
They get louder.
The stars begin to fade.
On a rush of stars, Anishinaabekwe is transported back into the world and transformed back into a woman.
She is sent back from over the stars.
She is placed gently back in the arms of Aki.

Songs welcome her back.
She is soaked.
She doesn't remember how she got so wet.
She shivers.
All four rounds are done.
"Where did the time go?" She asks herself.
She missed the entire ceremony.
Or did she?
The eastern door is opened.
She is brought out.
She is wrapped in a blanket.

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[14] Anangoog means stars.

[15] Abinoojiinyens is a baby or infant.

[16] Mide-waaboo is sacred water, which is how Anishinaabeg refer to amniotic fluid in the womb.

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She is given water to drink.

She is re-born.

She is Kwe.

Nanda-Gikendan (Seek Knowledge)

Boozhoo! Mazinegiizhigoo-kwe ndizhinikaaz. Greetings, my name is Painted Sky Woman.[17] I am *Anishinaabe-kwe* (woman), a member of Dokis First Nation, on *Okikendawdt* (Island of the Kettle Pots/Cauldrons/Swirling Waters), in the province of Ontario, Canada. My people live along *Waabnoong Bemjwang*, which means the '*place where the waters flow from the east*' or the French River, as it came to be called by European fur traders and settlers. I am *waabizheshi ndoodem* (Marten clan). My *Anishinaabeg*[18] heritage is *Ojibweg*, *Nipissing* and *Omamiwininiwag*, along with my father's French Canadian heritage. My ecological connections and knowledge are rooted in the territory of my *Anishinaabeg* mother, grandmother and those ancestral females who I am connected to through the *madjimadzuin* (maternal lifeline), or "chain of ancestors."[19]

In the early twentieth century, the *Anishinaabeg* peoples of *Wasauksing* First Nation (Parry Island, Ontario) shared with anthropologist Diamond Jenness the teachings of *madjimadzuin* that connects one generation to the next. Jenness wrote that the *Anishinaabeg* of *Wasauksing* taught that "it is the chain of ancestors connecting those who have gone before with those who follow, the line of ancestors and descendants together with all the inheritance factors they carry with them."[20] The *madjimadzuin* connections are encoded in maternal ecological teachings, stories and ceremonies that are used to educate our *Kwewag*[21] (women) in their intellectual traditions: philosophies, cosmologies, epistemologies, axiologies, and pedagogies. As an *Anishinaabe-kwe*, I see, relate to, move through, and react to the world through this *madjimadzuin* centered

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[17] My name also means "Woman who paints like the sky." I received this name from *Anishinaabeg* Elder Edna Manitowabi.

[18] *Anishinaabeg* refers to a specific culturally-related group of Indigenous peoples living in both Canada and the United States of America. *Anishinaabeg* territory is central located in Ontario Canada, but also encompasses the southern area of the Great Lakes region, reaches as far west as the province of Saskatchewan, east into the province of Quebec, and intersects with the *Nêhiyawak* (Cree) of northern Ontario. The Anishinaabeg include the nations of the *Ojibweg, Odaawaag, Boodawaadamii, Mississauga, Saulteaux, Oji-Cree, Nipissing,* and *Omamiwininiwag*. Alliances have existed among the particular groups for thousands of years.

[19] Jenness, D. 1935. *The Ojibwa Indians of Parry Island, Their Social and Religious Life*. Ottawa:National Museum of Canada, p. 90.

[20] Jenness, p. 90.

[21] In *Anishinaabeg* culture *Kwe* includes all individuals who identify as women, *Niizh-Manidoowag* (Two-Spirit), on the female gender spectrum, LGBTQIQQ2SA+ or queer/trans.

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paradigm. An *Anishinaabeg* maternal pedagogy is rooted in traditional maternal narratives concerning the wisdom of the ancestral mothers and grandmothers. Through the *madjimadzuin* we reach back through time and space, pulling their collective knowledge, traditions, and ways of being into our modern lives.

The story I shared above is a personal account of a vision that embodies my own ecologically centered relationship with the ecosystem of my Anishinaabeg ancestors. The story is mine to tell, but the knowledge contained in it does not belong solely to me, but to all *Anishinaabe-kwewag* (women). The *bawaajigan* is a gift from the spirits, land and stars to our people, so that we can build and restore some of the lost women's knowledge resulting from colonization. As *Anishinaabe-kwewag* we owe our gratitude to the teachings of the spirits, land and stars, along with returning this knowledge to our women. As long as we carry this knowledge, we will remember we belong to the land and we come from the stars. When Anishinaabeg talk about our traditional ecological knowledge we talk about where we come from. Elder Johnston shares in his book, *The Gift of the Stars: Anangoog Meegiwaewinan*, that the Anishinaabeg came from the stars and that when children are born they are gifts from the stars.[22] In another one of his books, *Honour Earth Mother: Mino-audjaudauh Mizzu-Kummik-Quae*, Elder Johnston tell us that the earth then is our mother because she nourishes us and cares for us.[23]

Acoma Pueblo scholar Simon J. Ortiz's poem "Land and Stars, The Only Knowledge" inspires me when he writes:

> North, West, South, and East.
> Above and Below and All around.
> Within knowledge of the land.
> We are existent.
> Within knowledge of the stars,
> We are existent...
>
> We are Existent within knowledge of land.
> We are Existent within knowledge of stars.
> All Around and Below and Above.
> East, South, West, and North.
> This is our prayer. This is our knowledge.

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[22] Johnston, B. 2010. *The Gift of the Stars: Anangoog Meegiwaewinan*. Cape Croker First Nation: Kegedonce Press, pp.19-22.

[23] Johnston, B. 2003. *Honour Earth Mother: Mino-audjaudauh Mizzu-Kummik-Quae.* Cape Croker First Nation: Kegedonce Press, pp. xv-xvi.

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This is our source. This is our existence.

Always the land is with us.
Always the stars are with us.
With our hands, we know the sacred earth.
With our spirits, we know the sacred sky.
We are with the land and stars.
We are with the stars and land.

With offering, all around outside.
With offering, all around inside.
This is the knowledge we have.
This is the existence we have.
In thankfulness, we give and we know.
In thankfulness, we receive and we know.[24]

The poem is similar to many Anishinaabeg prayers of thankfulness and gratitude towards all that Creation[25] provides for our continued survival. Sharing my vision, my story, 'The Other Side of the Stars,' is an unusual action in an academic paper, but it is based in a larger movement in Canada for the revitalization and cultural resurgence of Indigenous ways of knowing. Further, *Anishinaabeg* do not usually share their visions and it is not encouraged to do so with outsiders, but there is a reason I do so here. *Anishinaabeg* do not share their visions because it strips our spirits naked and our visions carry with them spiritual power that can be dangerous to trap on a page. However, as an educator it has also become a natural tool through which I can teach both Indigenous students who have not had the opportunity to experience their own culture or long to identify with an educator that understands their lived experiences, and also, those non-Indigenous students who show a desire to learn how to understand the complexities of indigeneity, converse with us, and form ally-relationships with Indigenous peoples or communities. Experience is fundamental to Indigenous learning, but reading or listening to someone's thoughts put into words can also connect deeply with the human heart, spirit and mind.

Sharing my *bawaajigan* as a story is part of a larger movement to revitalize and rebuild Indigenous cultural sovereignty. Colonization policies and laws, such as the Indian

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[24] Cajete, G. *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Sante Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000, p. 311.

[25] When I refer to Creation, it means all life and those things throughout the earth and cosmos or universe.

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Act (1876), were designed by the Canadian government to secure the extinguishment of Indigenous rights to land, resources, language, and culture. The Indian Act supported a cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada using laws that banned Indigenous spiritual ceremonies and other cultural practices, along with the Indian residential school system. The residential school system was designed to acculturate and assimilate Indigenous children into mainstream white hetero-patriarchal and hetero-normative Canadian culture. These re-education schools ran from the early 1800s right through until 1996. The government of Canada removed children directly from their families and communities on the threat of jail for the parents if they did not acquiesce. The children were then placed to mostly year-round residential education institutions where they were subjected to years of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, along with medical experimentation. Many children died due to the high rates of disease, such as tuberculosis and influenza. Those that managed to survive the schools were left stripped of their languages, cultural traditions and identity as Indigenous people.

Sharing my vision is important to *Anishinaabeg* people's journey towards cultural resurgence because it renews the ancestral maternal wisdom that was taken away from the women of my family and community who were indoctrinated into the Catholic faith by missionaries. They learned to fear practicing and sharing their traditional maternal wisdom, rituals, teachings, songs, prayers, language, and parenting strategies. I offer my story of this vision as a maternal pedagogy for *Anishinaabeg* maternal wisdom, intellectual thought, and ideology. Oneida scholar Pam Colorado notes that stories are powerful tools, that when shared:

> have the ability to integrate and synthesize all the living relationships or events at any given moment in life. When we rely on a story to guide us we are not only integrated with the natural environment around us and our living relations, but also with the timeless past and culture of our ancestors."[26]

Anishinaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson believes that Indigenous story can act as a "theoretical anchor whose meaning transforms over time and space within individual and collective Nishnaabeg consciousness."[27] The theories that live inside *Anishinaabeg* stories carry with them the spirits of our *aanikoobijiganag* (ancestors). *Anishinaabeg* believe that our stories are animate with the memories and spirits (*jiibayag*) of all those who have come before. When we share or re-enact those stories through ceremony we

[26] Colorado, Pam. 1988. Bridging Native and Western Science. *Convergence*, 11 (2, 3), 55.

[27] Simpson, L. 2014. Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3 (3): 7.

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are visiting with the spirits of our ancestors and initiating opportunities for learning, experiencing and creating new knowledge. My own personal approach to revitalizing cultural knowledge is embodied by both a 'need' (*nandawendam*) to fill in the blank spaces in my own cultural traditions, but also a natural desire to 'seek to learn' or 'seek to know' (*nanda-gikendan*). When we have questions about our culture, *Anishinaabeg* turn to our stories to find knowledge and instruction.

Anishinaabeg spiritual knowledge is encoded in story so that we know how best to live on our traditional territories. Indigenous ecological knowledge contained in story represents explanations of the natural world and sources of life, encoded with instructional stories of a way of living that depicts a deep and abiding relationship with the ecology of their ancestral home. Anishinaabeg people are people of the land, and the nature of their relationship with the land is conveyed in their stories. Cajete acknowledges that:

> story enables individual and community life and the life and process of the natural world to become primary vehicles for the transmission of Native culture. The culture's vitality is literally dependent on individuals, in community with the natural world. Indigenous cultures are really extensions of the story of the natural community of a place and evolve according to ecological dynamics and natural relationships.[28]

The physical, spiritual and emotional orientation of *Anishinaabeg* ecological stories are cognitive maps (*inendamowin mazina'iganan*[29]) that we carry and transfer from generation to generation and form the basis of our traditional knowledge systems. These cognitive maps are multi-dimensional and reflect the spiritual as well as the mythic geographies of a people that have journeyed to the worlds of spirit and back in order to live well on the land of our *indinawemaaganag* or our relatives in Creation.

The Sacred Maternal Ecology of the Anishinaabeg Sweat Lodge

[28] Cajete, p. 94.

[29] *Inendamowin mazina'iganan* means 'thinking map' or 'mind map.' To Anishinaabeg it is a map of the inner-space of the mind, our thoughts, and our feelings. *Inendamowin* is the way you think in a certain way or the way your mind works. It describes how person perceives something by thought and how it is felt in the mind. See, Inendam. *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary*. https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/inendam-vai2. Accessed 29 Nov. 2020. *Mazina'iganan* refers to maps or something that guides.

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The ecology of the sweatlodge is directly tied to the land and surrounding natural ecosystem. Everything we use for our ceremonies is taken directly from the landscape. We are thankful to the natural world and recognize that it is pivotal to the ceremonial process. *Anishinaabeg* build our lodges on our ancestral territories to continue the traditions and knowledge systems of our ancestors. To the *Anishinaabeg*, the land is recognized as our relative, who is animate and has several names, *Aki,*[30] *Shkaakaamikwe*[31] and *Mazikaamikwe.*[32] All her names relate to the earth and her role as the First-Mother-of-Creation; a place from which all life has arisen and is sustained. In our creation stories, *Gizhew-Manidoo* who is known as Creator-of-all-life in the cosmos, created *Aki* as the place where the sacred seeds of life would be placed, and they[33] gave to her the ability to generate new life and sustain that life from her body. As her descendants, women inherit her life-giving gifts and can exercise their choice to utilize their bodies to bring forth life, and ultimately, to become a mother.[34] The sweatlodge ceremony honours the path of womanhood and motherhood. The ecology of the sweatlodge mirrors the ecology of the woman's body, a mother's body. There is the womb (*abinoojiinh gaa-abid*[35]) that can house and give life, along with the breasts (doodooshimag) that nourish and sustain life. *Anishinaabeg* women's sweatlodge ceremony, also known as the *madoodiswan* or the *madoodoowgamig*, symbolizes the woman as a sacred site of creation, creativity and life.

The term *madoodiswan* is translated as sweatlodge, but also has within it other meanings that connect it to maternal identity and cosmology. *Madoodiswan* has in it the words *doodooshim*, meaning breast and *doodom* which translates to breastfeeding mother. In Anishinaabeg cosmology and astronomy, the *madoodiswan* is a cluster of stars shaped like a dome, a womb or a breast. These constellations are also referred to in Latin as the Corona Borealis or 'northern crown.' These stars appear in the spring and are

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[30] *Aki* means the earth, land, ground or territory.

[31] *Shkaakaamikwe* translates to a '*Mother who creates life with her body, nourishes with her body and her breasts.* According to Anishinaabeg singer and cultural knowledge holder Brenda MacIntyre it translates to *"something is soft and damp." See,* MacIntyre, B. Shkaakaamikwe/ Mazikaamikwe, Ezhi-ni'gikenimaanaan. *Earth Day Conference*, 20 April 2007. Michigan State University, p. 3.

[32] *Mazikaamikwe* means "she creates something new" or she creates life with her body. *See,* MacIntyre, B. Shkaakaamikwe/Mazikaamikwe, Ezhi-ni'gikenimaanaan, p. 3.

[33] The pronoun 'they' is used here to acknowledge that Anishinaabeg recognize that Gizhew-Manidoo has no gender and embodies both male and female creative energies.

[34] The concept of *Kwe* or woman is not solely defined by a woman's ability to conceive life or birth life. Womanhood is recognized as a spectrum and the Anishinaabeg acknowledge that there is multiple gender identities and that femininity and masculinity is a spectrum of knowing and being.

[35] *Abinoojiinh gaa-abid* refers to a baby's first home inside its mother. *Abinoojiinh* means home. *Gaa-* is past tense. *Abid* means she or he is home or dwells in a certain place.

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connected to *Anishinaabeg ziigwan-gikinoo'amaagoowinan* or 'springtime teachings of the Anishinaabeg.' We teach and perform the sweatlodge ceremonies both in the spring and fall; honouring the east doorway that brings new life and the western doorway marks the end of life, which also corresponds to the end of summer and harvest time. The springtime sweatlodge is a very powerful ceremony because it mirrors the earth's springtime process of cleansing and purifying after a long winter. In the spring, the sap runs and the ground grows moist and full with water. The rivers, lakes, and streams swell with spring runoff. Springtime is when the earth bathes itself clean, but also nourishes the land like a mother's breast milk feeds her baby. Thus, the *madoodiswan* constellation hangs in the sky like an upside-down lodge or a mother's breast full with milk, to remind us of this time to cleanse, heal and start anew. It is a time to go out on the land and take part in the renewal of life.

Another name for the sweatlodge is *madoodoowgamig*, which also honours the mother's breast and breastfeeding as a source of life. The shape of the stars form a dome, mirroring the shape of the mother's breast, along with the womb of life. The term *madoodoowgamig* translates to 'a structure or lodge shaped like a mother's breast.' Doodoom honours that mother who breastfeeds her child and gamig translates to a structure, building or lodge. To Anishinaabeg, the mother's breast, the source of life-giving nutrients is primary to the survival of future generations, and thus, the nation. As a reminder of our origins in the womb or at the mother's breast, the shape of the sweatlodge allows for a re-connection with the first ecology of our origin: our mother's body, including her womb, her arms, and her breasts. We built the lodge directly on the maternal body of Mother-the-Earth. Both words, *madoodiswan* and *madoodoowgamig* tie the sweatlodge structure closely to the concepts of femininity, womanhood, motherhood, creation, and Aki.

Madoodiswan or *madoodoowgamig* are words that are deeply connected to the *nookomis gikinoo'amaagoowinan* or grandmother teachings shared with the *Oshki-Anishinaabeg-kwewag* (young women) of the community at the time of their puberty rites and again at motherhood. *Nookomis Gikinoo'amaagoowinan* introduces young women to their ecological connections, roles and responsibilities as relations to the land, the water and skyworld, using the sweatlodge as a method of teaching and learning about those ways of knowing. Annette S. Lee, William Wilson, Jeffrey Tibbetts, and Carl Gawboy write in their book *Ojibwe Giizhig Anang Masinaa'igan, Ojibwe Sky Star Map Constellation Guide: An Introduction to Ojibwe Star Knowledge*, that the Grandmother teachings on the sweatlodge describe it as:

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> a purification ceremony. It is about returning to the womb and remembering/ renewing a person's spirit. The teaching is that human beings are made of body, mind, heart, and spirit. The spirit leads. The Sweat Lodge is seen overhead in late spring.[36]

Through the sweatlodge ceremony, women reconnect with the sacred feminine and maternal energies of the natural world. We are all born from our mother's wombs and fed at our mother's breasts, which Mohawk Elder[37] Katsi Cook calls the "first environment"[38] in a child's life.

We teach our women, both young and adult, that when they go out on the land to experience the spring sweatlodge ceremony, we must place our lodges on the body of *Aki* in order to physically embody the womb or breast rising up off the earth. The feminine body of *Aki* and her fertility is made real through the sweatlodge space. Making the earth embody a woman allows participants to see her as the center of life in a complex ecology of the earth. Surrounding her are her children and our ecological relatives, including the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, those that fly, and those that swim. The poles used in the frame of the sweatlodge are embedded into the land, anchoring and fusing the womb-like structure to the body of the earth. When we enter the lodge, we are metaphorically (re)entering into the womb of our origins, the womb of the First-Mother-of-Creation.

The sweatlodge is spiritually transformed from a mere lodge into a space of creation, creativity, and a place to dream and vision knowledge into being. Through the ecology of the lodge and through the *bawaajiganan* (visions/dreams) evoked by the intense heated atmosphere of the sweatloge ceremony, human beings go into the inner cognitive and spiritual spaces that open up to, and outwards towards, the metaphysical realms of spirit (*jiibay-akiing*) to 'seek knowledge' or seek communion with the beings of the spirit realms on how best to live in balance and harmony with the universe. The land upon which the sweatlodge is constructed becomes a nexus of energies, like a doorway or bridge between our ecology on earth and the ecologies of other worlds where the

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[36] Lee, A. S., William, W., Tibbetts, J., and Gawboy, C. 2014. *Ojibwe Giizhig Anang Masinaa'igan, Ojibwe Sky Star May Constellation Guide: An Introduction to Ojibwe Star Knowledge.* Cloquet: Avenue F Productions, p.13.

[37] The term Elder, with a capital E, is a term of honour given by Indigenous communities in Canada and the United States of America. They are those individuals who are recognized for their cultural work as older members of a community. Elders are the ones who work to uphold Indigenous traditional knowledge, including those who are considered language experts, ceremonial experts, storytellers, medicine women and men, oral history keepers, artists, traditional governance leaders, and other cultural knowledge holders. The title of Elder can be given and also rescinded by the community if the Elder does not meet the values and standards of ethical behaviour expected by those that awarded the title.

[38] Follet, J. 2005. *Voices of Feminism Oral History Project: Interview with KATSI COOK*. Northampton, MA: Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, p. 2.

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spirits dwell. In this way, the earth becomes a vital link in the journey of learning. Cree Elder Willie Ermine proposes that, "those who seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different, incorporeal knowledge paradigm that might be termed Aboriginal epistemology."[39] Ermine contends that Indigenous epistemologies are developed through the use of Indigenous sources of learning, including our ceremonies.

The Anishinaabeg embrace the teachings of the land and its inherent creativity as the source for both our knowledge and as a site of education where we 'seek life' (*nanda-bimaadizi*) in balanced and harmonous ways. Gregory Cajete notes that the natural world is the "creative generative center of human life"[40] and the source of all knowledge of how to 'seek life' in a good way. He explains that:

> Seeking life is the most basic of human motivations since it is connected to our natural instinct for survival and self-presentation. Ultimately, the universe is a creative expression at a magnitude beyond human recognition. Human life at all levels is wholly a creative activity and may be said to be an expression of the nature within us. We are, after all, a microcosm of the macrocosm. We are a part of a greater generative order of life that is ever evolving.[41]

In this way, the ecology of the sweatlodge embodies a site of human memory, relationships to the land, human creativity, discovery, research, or as a classroom (*gikinoo'amaagegamigong*) for learning.

The classroom space of the sweatlodge spans across multiple geographies in both this world and the realms of the spirits: sky realm (*giizhigoong*), land of the spirits (*jiibay-akiing*), and the underworld (*anaamakamig*). *Anishinaabeg* believe these ecologies intersect, overlap and exist concurrently with other worlds and realities. *Anishinaabeg* Elder James Dumont explains that:

> there is another level of reality which is concurrent with everyday reality and one of the ways we gain access to this "other reality" is through the dream. So it is, when we travel in dreams, we actually *do travel* […] The levels of reality *are*

[39] Ermine, W. 1995. Aboriginal Epistemology. In M. Battiste and J. Barman. eds. *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*. Vancouver: UBC Press, p. 104.

[40] Cajete, p.15.

[41] Cajete, p.15.

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> concurrent and have equal credibility They provide true experiences to which we must respond.[42]

Anishinaabeg enter the realms of spirit through our *bawaajiganan* (visions/dreams). We believe in the concept of "gichi-apiitendaagwadoon bawaajiganan," meaning that our dreams and visions are very important, greatly valued and honoured.[43] Ceremonies that allow us to travel across these sacred ecologies are critical teaching and learning spaces for *Anishinaabeg*. In this way, ceremonies act as the teaching methods that *Anishinaabeg* learned to utilize in order to access the field of learning and access the spaces where knowledge is generated.

Anishinaabeg sweatlodge ceremonies are conducted on the body of the earth in order to commune with her spirit. Anishinaabeg recognize that Mother-the-Earth is a living being and she has a jiichag (soul-spirit); upon which other living beings exist, move and thrive. In order to understand our place we will have to learn how to respect that the life that exists on the land is performing the great dance of life (*gchi-niimiwin bimaadizi*), which is in a state of flux, shifting, and moving creatively. Jicarilla Apache/Hispanic philosopher Viola F. Cordova explains that the "Native American world is a world in constant transition - the world, in other words, is not a thing made once and finished. It is always in the process of being. "Being," for Native Americans is not a static state but one of motion and change."[44] In order to understand our place in the ebb and flow of the *gchi-niimiwin bimaadizi* within our ecological environments, Anishinaabeg believe that we were given specific ceremonies by *Gizhew-Manidoo* and other *manidoowag* in order to receive life lessons, containing necessary knowledge and directions, needed to understand how to be *Anishinaabeg* in context with all of our relatives in creation. To understand what it means to be *Anishinaabeg*, we go into ceremony to integrate holistically (mind, body, spirit and emotions) with the ecologies we seek to reflect and respond to.

Cajete acknowledges that for Indigenous peoples, ceremonies are our "personal or communal "technologies" for accessing knowledge" and also a means through which we "remember key understandings of the natural world."[45] The information obtained through Indigenous ceremonial practices is believed to supply knowledge directly "linked to the Spirit of Creation. Anishinaabeg scholar Darcy *Ishpemingenzaabid* Rheault states that for

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[42] Dumont, James. 1976. Journey to Daylight Land: Through Ojibwe Eyes. *Laurentian University Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2: 33.

[43] "Bawaajigan," *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary. https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/bawaajigan-ni.* Accessed Oct. 1, 2020.

[44] Cordova, Viola F. "Ethics: From an Artist's Point of View." *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Anne Waters. Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 253.

[45] Cajete, p. 65.

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Anishinaabeg, ceremony acts as a process that allows for the sharing of knowledge through the voice of *Gzhe-mnidoo*."[46] Anishinaabeg believe that much of our knowledge and ceremonies are gifts from both nature and the spirits that teach us how to follow the Great Laws of Creation (*gchi-inaakonigewinan*), or Creator's Laws (*Gizhew-Manidoo-inaakonigewinan*). Anishinaabeg scholar Wendy *Makoons* Geniusz says that the words for this practice are "gaa-izhi-zhawendaagoziyang," meaning "that which is given to us in a loving way (by the spirits),"[47] and also evidence that, "we are loved by the spirits."[48] The word *zhawendaagozi* translates to "s/he is blessed, is fortunate."[49] From an *Anishinaabeg* perspective, our ceremonies are blessings and gifts given to us because the *manidoowag* (Spirits) love us, wish to communicate, wish to teach us, and they feel responsible for instructing us on how to live well (*mino-bimaadizi*) on the land.

Anishinaabeg recognize our connections to those *manidoowag* and our anikoobijiganag (ancestors) in an invisible chain connecting our reality to the realities existing in the realms of spirit. Anishinaabeg linguist James *Kaagegaabow* Vukelich notes that this perspective is encapsulated in the concept of *gidinawendimin*, which translates to "I am all of my relatives and all of my relatives are me."[50] Vukelich suggests that gidinawendimin is a way of being which emphasizes the belief that we must live as if we are one link in a chain going back through time seven generations and going all the way forward seven generations.[51] During ceremony we greet our ancestors and those yet to come with: *Boozhoo indinawemaaganag*! (Greetings all-my-relatives!). Through ceremony we recognize, reconnected and reaffirm gidinawendimin: "we are all related."[52]

Like Vukelich, Rheault writes that ceremony is a time when the "accumulated wisdom of the people is passed along to a new generation, thus ensuring a continuum of proper behaviour and attitude in life."[53] The knowledge generated during ceremony reinforces the relationships between all living beings while allowing the person to find their place in the world by providing the necessary foundation upon which to examine that

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46 Rheault, p. 82

47 Geniusz, p. 10.

48 Geniusz, p. 192.

49 Zhawendaagozi. *The Ojibwe People's Dictionary*. https://ojibwe.lib.umn.edu/main-entry/zhawendaagozi-vai. Accessed 28 Nov. 2020.

50 Vukelich, "Ojibwe Word of the Day Gidinawendimin. ᑭᑎᓇᐌᓐᑎᒥᓐ᙮ 'We are related to each other'." Facebook. 23 July, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/james.vukelich.7/videos/10222804566158361.swet. Accessed 8 Oct. 2020.

51 James Vukelich, Ojibwe Word of the Day Gidinawendimin.

52 James Vukelich, Ojibwe Word of the Day Gidinawendimin.

53 Rheault, D'Arcy. *Anishinaabe Mino-Bimaadiziwin (The Way of a Good Life): An Examination of Anishinaabe Philosophy, Ethics and Traditional Knowledge*. Peterborough, Debwewin Press, 1999, p. 83.

world.[54] Therefore, conducting ceremony "allows one to cross the seeming divide between physical and spiritual realms, whereby one can observe with a more complete perception."[55] Ceremony becomes a tool to travel between both sides and communicate with relations in multi-realities in order to become better *Anishinaabeg*. The practice of repeated ceremonial communion with manidoowag and the anikoobijiganag is foundational to the survival of Anishinaabeg ecological ways of knowing and being.

Anishinaabeg Elder James *Onaubinisay* Dumont describes this pedagogical worldview as having "three-hundred-and-sixty-degree-vision."[56] He notes that Anishinaabeg were given prophecies as warnings to us to follow a holistic path of living in accord with the spirits and through ceremony as a way of prioritizing a "total way of seeing the world."[57] Elder Dumont teaches that, "This was a circular vision that sought to perceive and understand the whole nature of an object or event - its physical reality as well as its soul. Dumont states that "The Red Man chose this road and he has developed in this circular and holistic way ever since."[58] The Anishinaabeg refer to this 'Red Man's' road as *Anishinaabeg mino-miikana bimaadiziwin* (the good path of life as Anishinaabeg). Learning to live on this 'good path' required constant 'checking in' with the *manidoowag* through ceremony and prayer to gain guidance or directions on how best to live.

The necessity for ceremonies originates within the *Gchi-Inaakonigewinan* (Great Laws of Nature; Laws of Creation), which are the natural laws or original laws of *Gizhew-Manidoo* that bind everything together in a delicate state of *gwayahkooshkawin* (balance) and *ninoododadiwin* (harmony). Anishinaabeg scholar Basil Johnston explains that, "The Great Laws governed the place and movement of sun, moon, earth and stars; governed the powers of wind, water, fire, and rock; governed the rhythm and continuity of life, birth, growth, and decay. All things lived and worked by these laws."[59] Cajete writes that "Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and restoring balance, renewal, cultivating relationship, and creative participation with nature."[60] All things on the earth are bound in a delicate web of relationships or compacts; essentially treaties, which work to uphold the *inaagkonigewinan* (laws) of Creation. Cajete explains that:

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[54] Rheault, p. 83.

[55] Rheault, p. 101.

[56] Dumont, p. 32.

[57] Dumont, p. 31-32.

[58] Dumont, p. 32.

[59] Johnston, Basil, 2008. *Ojibway Heritage*. 1976. Toronto, McClelland Stewart, p. 13.

[60] Cajete, p. 70-71.

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> Traditionally, Indigenous peoples understood that compacts must be made between sources of life, the land, their place, and with the natural entities there. The key relationships they established are reflected in ceremonies […] Ceremonies and rituals choreograph situations to bring people in contact with those compacts, the entities involved in relationships. The ceremonies themselves become ways of coming to know, of understanding. As compacts are never static and cyclic process exists even in their making and evolution, there are traditions of communal and environmental renewal."[61]

Ceremonies, while highly choreographed for the needs of the living, are in fact controlled by other-than-human teachers working to educate human beings, generation after generation, on how to live mino-bimaadiziwin (well in a good way).

Aazhawe-Anangoong (The Other Side of the Stars)

Anishinaabeg scholar and linguist Basil Johnston wrote the following passage in his book Ojibwe Ceremonies:

> *N'daebaub auzhiwi-anungoong,*
> *K'gah kikinowaezhigook anungook.*
> I can see to the other side of the stars,
> The stars will guide you.
>
> *N'daebitum auzhiwi-anungoong,*
> *K'gah noondaugook anungook.*
> I can hear the other side of the stars,
> The stars will hear you.
>
> *Kaugigae n'gah daebitaugoos.*
> Timeless is my voice…
>
> *Ae-naubindumun dah izhi-waebat,*
> *K'zhawaenimik Kitche Manitou.*
> What you dream will be,
> The Great Mystery is generous with you.[62]

[61] Cajete, p. 81.

[62] Johnston, *Ojibway Ceremonies*, p. 51.

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Johnston's passage about the 'the other side of the stars' has always moved me because it embodies my experience and my vision from inside of the sweat lodge. At the time of my vision, I did not understand its meaning. It took me many years and two children to understand the teachings of the *nindaanikoobijigan* (my ancestors) and *manidoowag*. I came to understand that my vision was rooted in maternal ecological pedagogy and maternal ecological knowledge. The lessons I learned spoke to me of my womanhood and my future role as mother.

Madoodiswan Gikinoo'amaagoowin: Teachings on Maternal Ecological Pedagogy from the Sweatlodge

The first teaching from the vision centered on the nature of maternal ecological pedagogy. The sweatlodge ceremony I undertook was designed and implemented within a Kwe (woman) centered ecological teaching and learning paradigm. Of significance to this pedagogy were the teachers, the support, and the classroom setting.

My teacher was the *Anishinaabe-kwe* Elder who conducted the ceremony, Edna Manitowabi (Wiikwemikong Unceded First Nation). For many years, she was my cultural mentor and teacher. She is also a mother and grandmother. Elder Manitowabi is a teacher in the Midewewiwin Lodge traditions and an educator in Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language). For generations, the *nookomisag* (grandmothers) and *mindimooyenh* (old wise women) have been the ones to lead the *oshki-Anishinaabe-kwe* (young women) and *Anishinaabe-kwe* (adult women) through women's ceremonies. These mindimooyenh, or Elders as we call them today, still teach in the manner of the old ways, using the same practices and knowledge from thousands of years ago. Every Anishinaabeg sweatlodge has to have a knowledgeable and experienced Elder conducting the process so that the ceremony is safe and culturally appropriate. She created an environment where a vision could take place, where I felt supported, and then guided me into the vision and out of the vision safely. Her directions, voice, and sacred medicines made her my metaphysical anchor to this reality so that my jichaag (soul-spirit) did not get separated into just the jiibay (spirit) part and become lost. Having her as a teacher allowed me to have a ceremonial experience that was consistently aligned with the experiences of generations of *Kwewag* (women) that have come before me.

In conjunction with the support of the Elder, there was also the support and teachings of the network of women that formed the circle in the sweatlodge. Inside the lodge there were women all around me. They sang, prayed, drummed, and shook their rattles with me and for me. Working in unison, the women of the sweatlodge connected

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spiritually together. Elder Manitowabi used her water-drum to connect us to Mother Earth and anchor us there with each drum beat. The Anishinaabeg translation of the drum is 'instrument for the sounds of the heart.' Drum in Anishinaabemowin is *ode'we'igan*. '*Ode"* meaning heart, '*we"* refers to the waves of sound as it travels, and lastly, 'igan' refers to the instrument. The drum acts as our remembrance and way to recall the conception of life in our universe, the first womb of Creation and first heart beat. We are told in our Creation story that out of the darkness came a wave of sound that expanded across the darkness, then a spark of light, and then finally the heartbeat of our universe as it was born into existence: thump, thump, thump, thump. Those heartbeat sounds are imbedded in all life and things throughout the universe. When women drummers drum in the sweatlodge and we shake our *zhiishiigwanag* (rattles) we honour those original sounds of creation; sounds that were born out of and from another time and place; products of energy, matter, and a great expanse of sound. The sounds of the *ode'we'gan* and *zhiishiigwan* are imitations of those first original waves of movement and sound that birthed a universe into existence. By re-creating that sound we can remember our origins and call forth the energies of Creation into the sweatlodge. Elder Mantiowabi and the other women in the circle of the lodge, metaphysically pulled those energies into the sweatlodge, so that the sound of Aki's heartbeat was heard as if we were babies in her womb.

As a network of women, they formed a circle of protection around me. In my vision, as I lay floating amongst the stars, I heard them drum, sing and shake their rattles. These women represented a metaphysical chain attached to an anchor of sound, holding me in place, so that I did not get lost amongst the spirit realms. Their voices tethered me to our everyday reality, so I knew my way back to the lodge. This sacred circle of women were my peers in the classroom of the lodge, but also my spiritual community.

Next, there were the teachings from the manidoowag, the ancestors and Gizhew-Manidoo. They came into the sweatlodge to take me into the realms of spirit. The spirits are the guides or facilitators for the visioning process and reveal knowledge through offering experiences that introduce a different way of coming-to-know information. They poured into the lodge like stars, transforming the space and myself, and taking me into the many realms and multi-realities of the spirit worlds. The teaching practice of the manidoowag prioritizes a direct and experiential learning experience that creates a unique congruence between the inner and outer realities. Cree/Métis scholar and Elder Joseph Couture offers that:

> Reality is experienced by entering deeply into the inner being of the mind, and not by attempting to break through the outer world to a beyond. This positions

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> the Native person in 'communion' with the living reality of all things. His 'communion' is his experience of the ideas within, concentric with reality without. Thus, to 'know,' to cognize, is experiential, direct knowing.

In this exploration of spiritual ecology, the manidoowag pedagogy that I directly experienced centered on building connections between the earthly world and the spirit worlds to facilitate the flowing of information. Anishinaabeg Elder Herb Nabigon explains that the sweatlodge acts as a reminder of the harmonics of how we are and should be residing in our traditional ecologies, be those in the land or our own bodies.[63] Further, Elder Nabigon also suggests that it works to help our people to, "listen to themselves first and hear the voice of the Creator through the voices of the Grandmothers and Grandfathers, as well as their ancestors who are in [the] Spirit World […] That is the essence of the sweatlodge."[64]

Finally, came the the lessons of Aki, the land. First, we take all our resources for the sweatlodge from the land. We harvest poles from young saplings, plant medicines, and stones from the land. The death of those living things, including the trees and plant medicines are thanked and shown gratitude for their sacrifice. The land provides space for us to have the ceremony. We clean an area of trees and bushes to provide a space to construct the lodge for the sweat. The space is then surrounded by the life of the forest. When we construct the lodge we dig holes for the poles into the earth and put our *semaa* (sacred tobacco) into the holes, say prayers and thank the land for allowing us the space to conduct our ceremonies, for the sacrifices she makes and for taking part in our ceremony as the doorway through which we will enter our journey to the realms of spirit. When we enter her womb, we enter the earth and join with her. Just as a woman welcomes new life into her body, we must respect the role she provides as life-giver. Furthermore, from her body and upon her body we find a woman's centered space of learning (*Anishinaabe-kwewag gikinoo'amaagegamigong)*.

Maternal Ecological Knowledge

Where is the other side of the stars? What is on the other side of the stars? It is the womb of Gizhew-Manidoo: waawiyekamig. The first and original womb of Creation. The reason I think I went there is because I am a woman and I have an ancestral link to that location via all the mothers and grandmothers who have come before me. Travelling through a

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[63] Nabigon, H. 2006. *The Hollow Tree: Fighting Addiction with Traditional Native Healing*. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 83.

[64] Nabigon, p. 85.

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river of stars to auzhiwi-anungoong was like travelling home again through a cosmic umbilical cord to the first lodge of Creation.

The maternal ecological knowledge I acquired has to do with understanding Kwe and her life-giving gifts, her gifts of female energy, fertility, pregnancy, birth, and motherhood. From the vision, I was witness to the ancient and abiding power of being Kwe (woman). Kwe was given the gifts of womanhood for her to choose to bring forth life into the universe: conception, pregnancy, birth, parenting. She was given female energy from Gizhew-Manidoo to balance the masculine energies. Those energies bring forth life, they nurture life, and they form a partnership with masculine energies to bring harmony to the universe. There is feminine energy in all living beings as there are also masculine energies. We all originate in a mother's womb, but we come from both the feminine and masculine coming together in unison to create life. In the original story of the creation of the universe, we learn that *waawiyekamig* is the original womb for life in our universe. The womb is the first ecology and Aki provided her own body for human life to be born. From the realm of spirit, a new soul-spirit is brought into the womb of a woman, then it moves through the birth canal, and out on a wave of water into the world through the first doorway of life. The vision showed me that being Kwe is coming-to-know and coming-to-understand these complex epistemological and ontological aspects of the multi-dimensional ecology of our bodies as Kwewag: doorways to the realm of spirits.

Additionally, I came to realize that my journey through the sweatlodge was a transformative rebirth. The process of the sweat lodge mirrors the process of birth. The sweat lodge sits on the land or lap of Mother the Earth. During the sweatlodge ceremony we greet her as mother and grandmother and acknowledge her body as the womb of the earth. The relevance of the land to this birth or re-birth is pivotal because Aki is the First Mother of all life on earth and our first teacher of how to mother in a good way as Anishinaabe-kwewag. The sweat lodge ceremony reconnects women to that original relationship. Similarly, when a woman labours she performs similar functions. When I was given labouring teachings from my Indigenous midwives for the pregnancy of my first daughter, they told me how important it is to plant my feet on the floor during labour to get myself as close to earth as possible. We need her ecological energy and her strength as our First-Mother in Creation. Their teachings also encouraged walking and sitting on the birthing stool with both feet touching the floor. They even discussed how I should envision our feet rooting into the ground and drawing energies up from the earth into my body to pull in those supportive energies from Mother Earth.[65]

[65] I had two cesarean-sections with my daughters, so I never got to embody those teachings, but I share them with other Anishinaabeg women and will one day share them with my daughters.

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As I floated in a lake of stars, I didn't know what I was seeing and experiencing, but years later when I had my children, I realized I was seeing from inside the womb. When I was floating, I heard the voices of the women in the lodge as if from underwater. I heard the drum beat of Elder Manitowabi's water-drum as if it was the heartbeat of my own mother. I was experiencing what it feels like to be a fetus in the womb, but also coming to understand what my own children would experience from inside my womb.

The sweat lodge is based on the same premise of rooting ourselves on the land. By sitting on the ground inside the sweatlodge we connect or link with her energies. The sweat lodge is run in rounds where new grandmother/grandfather rocks are brought into the lodge's central fire, which represents the womb of Mother Earth. The rounds are representative of the contractions that come during a woman's labour. The introduction of the rocks is the beginning of the contraction. The first round is relatively gentle like the beginning of labour. As the new rocks are placed in the center, water and sacred plant medicines are sprinkled over the rocks creating hot healing steam, which radiates outward towards the participants of the sweat. The reaction among participants is physically straining. Participants breath deep and laboured. They sweat and strain to control their breathing to ensure they do not pass out and allow themselves to talk, sing and pray along with each other. When the round is over, the door is opened and participants are offered fresh air and water if they require. It is a time to rest, recover, and prepare mentally for the next round. Similarly, when a labour contraction ebbs, a woman is offered water and encouraged to rest. With each round, the heat grows and the physical, emotional and spiritual rigor of the sweat increases. After each contraction, a woman's struggle becomes similarly more intense and challenging. Just as a labouring woman reaches out for her partner to brace themselves against the contractions and gain support, the sweatlodge participants will sometimes lean back against he poles, grasp onto the poles behind them or the earth below them, energetically rooting and fusing themselves to the land.

At the end of the labour the baby is born through the eastern doorway on a wave of mide-waaboo (amniotic fluid; sacred water). The mother is exhausted, spent, but also transformed from woman into mother. Similarly, at the end of the sweatlodge rounds, participants exit out the eastern doorway, forever changed. Like new mothers, they re-emerge into the world exhausted and spent. Covered in the waters of their own sweat that acts to purge and cleanse their bodies. Like Aki in the spring, the sweatlodge participants are reborn, transformed and renewed. The ecology of the land at ziigwan (spring) is mirrored in the ecology of the sweatlodge. Just as the land gives forth new life in spring with melting snow and running tree sap, so too does the woman on a surge of amniotic fluid, and so does the sweatlodge, with its participants soaked with their own

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cleansing sweat. Again, understanding the complexity of the spiritual ecology of a woman's body was a key lesson from the sweatlodge.

When we exit the doorway of the sweatlodge, we are treated as if we are newborn babies. We are wrapped up in towels, given liquids to drink, talked softly to, and we are welcomed gently into this world as our mother's once did. We crawl and then walk out onto *Aki* as gently as a child trying to take its first steps. This process mirrors the way the first human being, known as "ani niisayi'ii naabe owe akiing (a human was lowered onto the earth),"[66] did in the Creation stories:

> Seeing the strength and the beauty of all that was created on this earth, he [Original human being] too desired to be as this earth and as the creation. And so it is said that, as he approached the earth, he pointed his toes so that somehow, if at all possible, when he touched down on this earth, he would not stamp out or crush even the smallest blade of grass, the tiniest flower, the smallest living creature that crawled upon the earth. Rather, he would come down in and amidst the creation and be a living and loving, harmonious part of all that is. This is how Original Human Being touched down upon the Earth. That is how the First Human Being, Anishinaabe: the red colour of man, met his Mother the Earth for the first time.

We learn in this practice to respect our mothers and all women. Women and our mothers are our first teachers, our first nourishers, and the first to love us. The core ecological teaching of the women's sweatlodge are these words from Anishinaabeg Elder Art Solomon, which state that, "The women "were of the earth." They were connected to the Earth Mother and […] whose work was to govern when all things were to be born, plants, animals, humans […] The woman is the centre of everything."[67]

From this vision from the sweatlodge and the experience of moving through the ecology of the sweatlodge, I take away a wealth of maternal ecological knowledge and understandings of both the pedagogy of the natural world and of women in my culture. Traditional ecological knowledge is not merely human theoretical musings, but is a living force that binds together the web of relations that exists between all living beings and non-living things within our universe. Anishinaabeg ecological knowledge will always

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[66] Courchene, D. 2015. Language *as the* root of Ojibwe Knowledge. *Geez Magazine*. https://www.academia.edu/30414319/Language_as_the_root_of_Ojibwe_knowledge. Accessed 28 Nov. 2020, p. 26.

[67] Posluns, M. 1990. *Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way, Poems and Essays of Arthur Solomon*. Toronto: NC Press Limited, p. 34-35.

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reside first and foremost on the land of our ancestors and the traditions they left behind so that we can continue to access both old and new knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

Anishinaabeg have no word for goodbye in our language, so I always use that as an excuse for why I feel uncomfortable with making conclusions. Conclusions, like exiting the sweatlodge, should be done gracefully, with care and without much fuss on the way out. My thoughts on the nature of Anishinaabeg traditional ecological knowledge are rooted in my relationship with the land. The land is my mother. The spirit of that earth is everything to my life and to the life of my people. My ties to the territory of my ancestors, my nation, my clan, and my family is dependent on the ecology of the French River and the island of Okikendawdt. Elder Edna Manitowabi always said to those she taught, that when you find you are lost, stressed, scared, overwhelmed, or need comfort, go sit on the lap of your mother the earth. That concept sums up Anishinaabeg traditional ecological maternal knowledge. In closing, I offer a prayer for Aki the land and the sacred ecology of the territory of the Anishinaabeg. The prayer is offered by the Elders Council of the United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnisiing, which include the First Nations communities of Aundeck Omni Kaning, M'Chigeeng, Sheguiandah, Sheshegawaning, White Fish River, and Zhiibaahaasing.[68] The prayer speaks to the Anishinaabeg connections to land, territory and all our relations in Creation. I do this so that the language and culture surge forward into the future, but also because it allows other Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to see and learn to respect that the heart and spirit of the Anishinaabeg lies with Aki, the earth, our First Mother in Creation.

Mii maanda enweyiing
This is our land

Ngo dwe waangizid Anishinaabe
All tribes in our nation

Debenjiged gii'saan Anishinaaben akiing
Creator placed the Anishinaabe on the earth

[68] United Chiefs and Councils of Mnidoo Mnisiing. "Mii manda enweyiing, ngo dwe waangizid Anishinaabe." 2001. http://www.uccmm.ca/. Accessed 1 Apr. 2021.

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Giibi dgwon gaadeni mnidoo waadiziwin
Along with the gift of spirituality

Shkode, nibi, aki, noodin, giibi dgosdoonan wii naagdowendmang maanpii Shkagmigaang.
Here on mother earth, there were gifts given to the Anishinaabe to look after, fire, water, earth and wind.

Debenjiged gii miinaan gechtwaa wendaagog Anishinaaben waa naagdoonjin ninda niizhwaaswi kino maadwinan
The Creator also gave the Anishinaabe seven sacred gifts to guide them. They are:

Zaagidwin, Debwewin, Mnaadendmowin, Nbwaakaawin, Dbaadendiziwin, Gwekwaadziwin miinwa Aakedhewin
Love, Truth, Respect, Wisdom, Humility, Honesty and Bravery

Debenjiged kiimiingona dedbinwe wi naagdowendiwin.
Creator gave us sovereignty to govern ourselves

Kaamnaadendanaa gaabi zhiwebag miinwaa nango megwaa ezhwebag, Miinwaa geyaabi waa ni zhiwebag.
We respect and honour the past, present and future.

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Kenotic Walking, Wilderness Sojourning, and Hospitality

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Birdsong reverberates under the canopy of trees and through thick rhododendron shrub, resonating with hollow logs. A slight breeze rustles leaves in the treetops, creating a crisp susurrate that mingles with the melodies of birds. My footsteps also resound, a rhythmic percussion with the planting, thrusting, and lifting in connection with the soil, root, and rock of the trail tread. The concert fills the spatial surround and makes the air seem saturated with presence, as if my body were passing through a living organism.

If I were to focus on the concert, enjoy the music as one who sits in a concert hall, I would have to stop walking. The trail is too rugged for this kind of appreciative thought; to divert attention from the challenging tread would result in a fall, a twisted ankle, a broken bone. But, I have experienced walking on a wilderness trail that opened me to the musical, visual, tactile, and aromatic saturation of the spatial surround, and at the same time my attention remained present to the full sensuous array unfolding in each moment; each footfall, flexing muscle, lung expanding and contracting, breath and intertwining of consciousness and body. This merging of action and awareness is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) refers to as flow. He writes:

> It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next […] and in which there is little distinction between self and environment (1975, p. 43)

He also writes, "one is very aware of one's actions, but not of the awareness itself" (1975, p. 45).

In previous publications I have explored long-distance wilderness hiking as contemporary pilgrimage wherein meaning making rises in the interplay between contemplative walking and flow (Redick, 2016). Extended wilderness rambles distance pilgrims from their everyday lifeworld. They encounter new possibilities and script new meaning. Hospitality has also been shown to be a key phenomenon in these sojourns. As

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pilgrim/hikers learn to receive hospitality, especially in the context of wilderness, wherein the givers of hospitality are the extra-human inhabitants of the land, these pilgrim/hikers might return home and begin to show more hospitality to both human and extra-human constituents. This essay extends these explorations with an introduction of kenotic walking, or walking-self-emptying.

Kenotic walking will be shown to be distinct from mindfulness meditation. In drawing this distinction, I will briefly highlight an example of mindfulness meditation in the context of a wilderness trek as described by Belden C. Lane (2014). I will also reflect on the ecstatic religious experiences of Saint Teresa of Avila and compare them to kenotic walking.

I will employ a phenomenological approach, listening to the voices of philosophers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion. I will employ Jacques Derrida's thoughts on hospitality in showing the difference between pilgrims and tourists. In receiving absolute hospitality, the pilgrim becomes aware of mutual existence and begins emptying human centered economic strategies while searching for a more inclusive ecology. This essay will show the connection between the religious experience of wilderness sojourning and a more inclusive ecological consciousness.

Variations in Walking Experiences

Various walking experiences during long-distance hikes manifest depending on trail conditions, focus of attention, solitude, or companionship. In order to better understand flow in this context, also referenced as kenotic walking, I will briefly describe these experiences, beginning with shorter walks, day hikes on established park trails versus wilderness paths such as the Appalachian Trail. In both cases, domestic and wild, day hikes serve to remove the walker from their accustomed living and working places spatially, but the distance in time keeps them closer to their everyday lifeworld. Walking in this context may serve to clear one's thoughts or focus attention partially, but proximity of the everyday lifeworld, its stresses as well as its joys, mix. The well-groomed tread of the park trail is conducive to conversations with companions as well as reflective thought, not demanding the hiker's full attention. Thoreau's essay on walking illustrates what might happen on such a hike:

> it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither. I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the wood bodily, without getting there in spirit. In my afternoon walk I would fain forget all my morning occupations and my obligations to society. But it sometimes happens that I cannot

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> easily shake off the village. The thought of some work will run in my head and I am not where my body is — I am out of my senses. In my walks I would fain return to my senses. What business have I in the woods, if I am thinking of something out of the woods? (1957, pp. 597-598)

Walking in the park with a companion, with a communication device, or with thoughts of life elsewhere takes the hiker out of her senses. Though the Appalachian Trail is more rugged, demands more focused attention, day hiking thereon presents some of the same challenges of shaking off the village.

Many people who do hike on wilderness paths such as the Appalachian Trail engage in overnight camping, for a couple of days or a week. The relatively short time in the woods is not enough to shake off the village. The challenge of the trail tread and the pack strapped to the body leave the hiker feeling awkward while walking. A week is not enough time to condition one's self to the demands of steep ascents and descents, roots and rocks, mud and mosquitoes, and the load of supplies that constantly tugs, rubs, and drags. Just when the hiker seems to be getting into the rhythm of walking, some surprising interruption obtrudes. Just when the way ahead looks relatively easy, almost like the park trail, she rounds a bend and discovers a fallen tree that requires more agility than anticipated. She crawls through the dense branches and becomes snagged. She removes her pack in the middle of twisted limbs and then drags it the rest of the way through. Once clear of the tree, she is drenched in sweat, bleeding, and her new high-tech clothing is ripped. If she were a long-distance hiker and had been on the trail for a month or more, this challenge would have become commonplace. She would continually have wounds on her arms and legs in various stages of healing. Her clothes would be in tatters. But short-term hikers do not come out on the trail for this. They may have had some romantic notion of blazing a path through scenic beauty, but the reality is nothing like the imagined trek.

The Camino de Santiago provides a long-distance pilgrimage far removed from most pilgrim's lifeworld both spatially and temporally. There is a descriptive phrase that pilgrims apply once they have become attuned to the rhythm and challenge of the walk, "being in Camino." Yet, walking along that well established path does not involve the same challenge of a wilderness trail tread, the steep ascents and descents, or the necessity of camping. The pathway of the Camino itself facilitates contemplative walking. There are a few places, such as the descent from Alto del Perdón, very steep and across ancient river stones, that require the pilgrim's full attention directed toward each step. However, most of the way pilgrims can walk side by side, chat, look out at the beautiful scenery without stopping, or engaging in meditative mindfulness.

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Pilgrimages, such as the Camino de Santiago, and long-distance hikes in the wilderness have similar transformative effects. The hiker's whole person is being transformed during the course of the journey, and this opens them to flow. In the first weeks of the journey, a north-bound hike on the Appalachian Trail starting in Georgia for example, the trail tread, the ascents and descents, and the weather provide challenges that result in blisters, sore muscles, chaffing, back pain, wet clothes, cold, and various forms of mental fatigue ranging from anxiety to loneliness. With the continual rhythm of rising early, breaking camp, finding water, making and eating meals, taking breaks, finding a new camp, setting up a tent and sleeping, enduring diverse weather conditions and environmental obstacles, the hiker's body, perceptions, and emotions adapt: blisters heal, muscles become conditioned and grow, fat burns away, agility increases, and attunement happens. Just as with other skill oriented activities - wherein practitioners require attention to learning coordination between movement, effort, and timing - once mastered less attention focuses on the skill so that the practitioner is freed to explore more depth of involvement in the activity and its relation to an increasing constellation of things that remained invisible during the learning process. Mastering is a kind of personal transformation accompanied by freedom from the constraints of learning. This freedom opens hikers to flow as less attention is self-focused, moving instead to that which transcends the self. As noted in the introduction, the action happening in flow requires "no conscious intervention on our part" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 43) and awareness is of the action "but not of the awareness itself" (p. 45).

Mindfulness Meditation

Kenotic walking has much in common with mindfulness meditation. Belden C. Lane describes mindfulness in the context of wilderness backpacking (2014). His chapter, "Mindfulness: Moonshine Hollow and Thich Nhat Hanh," gives a clear and detailed account of hiking in the Ozarks while both practicing and reflecting on mindfulness. He does, however, articulate a qualifying statement, seemingly distancing his practice from mindfulness: "Contemplative prayer is what gets you out of your head entirely […] The mindfulness that wild terrain evokes is actually a sort of 'mind*less*ness,' an end-run around rational analysis that seeks an immediacy of presence" (2014, p. 98). This seeming paradox points to a distinction that I make between kenotic walking and mindfulness.

Thich Nhat Hanh, in *The Miracle of Mindfulness: an Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (2016), begins to describe mindfulness in writing, "I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts

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and actions. There's no way I can be tossed around mindlessly […]" (2016, p. 4). In another similar passage he writes, "When walking the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking. When sitting […] conscious that he is sitting […] thus, the practitioner lives in direct and constant mindfulness of the body" (p. 7). In flow, or kenotic walking, one key element, as already indicted, is of "no conscious intervention on our part" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 45). The distinction between mindlessness and mindfulness, in this context, is complex.

Lane outlines four aspects of mindfulness, as he interprets it in the context of wilderness hiking: "welcoming of awareness," "intentionality," "non-attachment," and "engaging the body" (2014, pp. 102-108). Much of his description is consistent with kenotic walking, yet, he may be overlooking the role of consciousness in mindfulness. Mindfulness results from practiced technique and its accompanying knowledge. Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "practice mindfulness in order to build up concentration", and "You should know how to breathe to maintain mindfulness" (2016, p. 15). He continues, "Your breath is the wondrous method of taking hold of your consciousness […] Learn to practice breathing in order to regain control of body and mind, to practice mindfulness, and to develop concentration and wisdom" (p. 22). Clearly, this is a method that brings practitioners into a conscious control of themselves, a practice that can be sustained through wilful action. One of Lane's carefully written reflections illustrates the difference consciousness plays when comparing mindfulness and flow. Lane writes that "Mindfulness is the fleeting instant of awareness we experience just before we begin to conceptualize reality and make judgments about it" (2014, p. 103). Mindfulness as articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh is not a "fleeting instant of awareness," but a practiced and sustained awareness that helps control conceptualizing and making judgements. Flow sometimes happens as a "fleeting instant," but can also be a fleeting hour of awareness. Fleeting is a great descriptor of flow; the pilgrim/hiker does not employ a method to sustain the practice, nor is there any "taking hold of consciousness." Rather, the practice of long-distance hiking facilitates flow, it opens those engaged to this "fleeting" awareness. It is only after being on the trail for an extended time that the hiker's conditioning opens them to kenotic walking.

Facilitating Flow

The transformation that conditioning of the whole person brings allows hikers to walk longer distances with increasing speed. The limited timeframe for the overall hike, Georgia to Maine, takes from four to six months, brings with it an underlying goal to walk a steady and quick pace over as many miles as one's stamina allows each day. The Tennessee/

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Virginia border is 465 miles from the Southern terminus at Springer Mountain, Georgia. The trail through Virginia spans about 535 miles, the longest section of trail in a single state. Because hikers experience a transformation of the whole person in the first few weeks of walking, they enter Virginia as skilled veterans. It is no wonder that many long-distance hikers heading north on the AT say Virginia is easy, or that it is relatively flat. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those who section hike in Virginia find it extremely challenging and never flat. Mountains in Virginia reach over 5,500 feet and the trail plunges as low as 670 feet near the James River. There are many ascents and descents of 3,000 feet in relatively short spans. While hikers struggled over similar terrain in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, their conditioning propels them over the mountains in Virginia, where the trail is equally as rugged. The increasing speed and determination to complete the hike that some hikers experience facilitates flow.

As the hiker walks with more agility, her pace quickens over the rugged terrain, and her attention to what had been obstacles - such as rocks, roots, mud, and logs - becomes singular. That is, attention itself is not divided between techniques for navigating difficult terrain and the elements that constitute the trail. Instead of learning to navigate or applying learned techniques toward these challenges, her new-found freedom and rhythm opens her to walking-flow, a kind of ecstatic dance. Gerardus van der Leeuw writes:

> The dance, by its very nature, is ecstatic. It makes man beside himself, lifts him above life and the world, and lets his whole earthly existence perish in the maelstrom […] Intoxication and the dance belong together. When the dance is genuine, one can no longer speak of an action which one performs, but of a dance which sweeps one away (1963, p. 29).

In the ecstasy of both dance and flow, the action does not seem to be wilful, it comes upon the dancer or hiker as a kind of irruption. However, it is not an irruption that involves an immediate awareness of being "swept away," nor of being lifted "above life and the world." Instead, one is engulfed with such intensity that the attention of the whole person is thoroughly infused in the action, negating any kind of self-reflection. Consciousness of self is emptied and being "beside himself" in this context "sweeps" one's attention away from self-consciousness and into a full and undivided participation with the constituents of the immediate spatial surround.

This full and undivided participation, or communion, can be understood as unfolding in a kind of orchestral action. On one hand, the hiker and various trail constituents become fellow musicians collaborating under the direction of an unseen conductor. Each footstep resounds in contact with log, stone, gravel, puddle, stream.

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Wind courses through tree branches where leaves clap and reveal eddies in the otherwise invisible atmosphere, all the while resonating with various bodies along the forest floor, including that of the hiker. On the other hand, the hiker and the myriad of others present interact bodily in the orchestra, the dancing place. A wild turkey responds to the passing walker, leaving its perch in the nearby tree and beating its wings furiously, crashing through branches as it exits the arena. The hiker adjusts her stride, or maybe pauses completely, in step with the fleeing turkey. As the trail twists around a boulder, she shortens her stride and turns with the arc, gravity pulling, and in response she lowers her center, slightly bending knees and leaning in toward the stone. Just beyond the turn a fallen tree lays across the trail, invisible prior to rounding the bend, and she moves her center upward, lifts one leg over while thrusting with the other, and feels somehow a connection to the boulder and the fallen tree. In the move and counter move she has been dancing, not alone but with elements who remain in place.

Being lifted above "life" and "the world" is not a separation from this life of walking, of this place in the wilderness. It is better understood in terms of Thoreau's reference to shaking off the village, a breaking free from the constraints of life as known prior to the hike, a liminal separation. It is the dance rather than the will distancing the hiker from the village. The ecstatic aspect of the dance also calls our attention to being freed from the constraints of learning; in flow there is a seeming effortlessness that is impossible when one's attention is fixed on acquiring a skill. In this regard van der Leeuw uses the word "hovering" to describe the dance, "here man does not subjugate the world by mastering a rhythm, but by being himself caught up in and ruled by this rhythm" (1963, p. 24). In being caught up the dancers "forget themselves: they lose the heaviness of being bound to earth" (p. 25). The hiker's attention is still highly focused on each step, each careful placement of the foot in between protruding stones, stepping over logs of various sizes, and at the same time watching for white blazes, the trail markers painted on trees, boulders, and posts. As the hiker's whole person is transformed after weeks of walking, attention is freed from acquiring a skill and opened to the ecstasy of flow. Van der Leeuw writes, "It is as though, in rapture, closed doors are opened and all hindrances disappear, particularly those of the body: lightly and freely the ecstatics soar away" (1963, p. 488).

Contemplative Walking

Though there is no memory of the moment the happening began, no recollection of an entrance into the ecstatic walking, the experience can only be recalled in memory as no discursive thoughts occurred while in the happening. It is in the memory that the experience happens as there were no conceptual or self-focused thoughts during the

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happening. When the hiker returns to self-awareness it is possible that they may not recognize what has happened, not recall the experience. Maybe a grouse, startled and flushed by the approaching hiker, brings self-awareness back. The now self-conscious hiker focuses, with divided self, both self-conscious and attentive to the grouse, on the bird flying through the brush. When the disturbance settles, walking resumes without thinking about what was happening just minutes ago while in flow. Or, the ecstasy seems to spill over into the continuing walk, as a powerful dream hangs on in the emotions after waking up. But in the case of a dream, one may remember the dream vaguely, specifically, or not at all, whereas in flow everything can be remembered except the moment it began. As in the dream one feels the weight of something forgotten that can be remembered.

Because long-distance hikes extend over months and vast distances, these ecstatic experiences may last moments, minutes, or hours. During my own thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail, I recall having this experience for many hours. There were many days when I walked for miles without a thought. Afterward, I remembered everything clearly, the terrain, climbing, descending, sunbeams dispersed through tree branches, the sound of rain, the feel of sweat dripping down my nose, the sense of gravity tugging at my body, breathing, planting hiking poles into the ground, and birdsong. Yet, no thoughts accompanied these memories, only an overwhelming sense of communion, an undivided involvement where everyone participated in the dance. A unique stillness, what Thomas Merton refers to as *quies* or *hesychia* in describing the mystical writings of the desert fathers, pervades, spilling over from ecstasy into self-conscious walking. Csikszentmihalyi writes, “It is quite obvious that certain states of rapture which are usually labeled ‘religious’ share the characteristics of flow with play and creativity” (1975, p. 44).

Flow in wilderness walking, as well as some forms of religious mystical practice, differ in some ways from other examples mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi: such as with “athletes, artists […] scientists” and others (1997, p. 110). Even though there are some overlapping characteristics of athletes, pilgrims, long-distance hikers, and religious mystics — embodied discipline, askesis — the solitude of the religious mystic and wilderness walker differ considerably from the athletic arena. In both religious contemplation and wilderness trekking there is much less distraction immediately after the ecstasy of flow. Opportunity for reflection opens one to remembering what happened and then to contemplating its meaning. In contemplation, memory is set forth in discursive thought and incorporated as meaningful through description, which may take the form of narration.

Since no thoughts manifested in language while flow was happening, there is no immediate way to describe the moment by moment unfolding between the hiker and the

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place. Looking to memory and setting it forth in thought shows what Hans-Georg Gadamer writes about language, that it conceals "one's whole relationship to the world" (1977, p. 92). He goes on to write, "One of the fundamental structures of all speaking is that we are guided by preconceptions and anticipations in our talking in such a way that these continually remain hidden and that it takes a disruption in oneself of the intended meaning of what one is saying to become conscious of these prejudices as such" (p. 92). As we bring forth memories we are guided by hidden preconceptions. For example, one of my own memories of flow, described in another publication, demonstrates the hidden preconception. I wrote, "My thoughts, while climbing this day, did not reflect on any of this description; I only write this after the fact. My thoughts ran like a river; this rock, this tree, this birdsong, this purple, this bit of blue sky" (Redick, 2016). I never had a thought of "rock," "tree," "birdsong," "purple," or "blue sky." When I recall the memory and describe it, these words I am accustomed to using easily fall into place and the memory seems clearly articulated. But that is the result of a preconception that remains concealed until I disrupt the intended meaning. In questioning the articulation of the memory through contemplation, I disrupt the intention that looks back through the memory. I bracket the descriptive terms, "rock," "tree," "birdsong," "purple," and "blue sky." As a result, I recall the memory more carefully and realize that, indeed I did see a rock, a tree, some purple and some blue sky; I did hear birdsong, but I did not think those words. The solitude and separation from the village, conducive to contemplation, facilitates such careful description and a phenomenological bracketing of preconceptions that mischaracterize experience.

Levinas' distinction between 'saying' and 'said' sheds light on this same contemplative practice of careful description. The happening of walking in flow is a saying that has not congealed into the said. Levinas writes that "saying does move into language, in which saying and said are correlative of one another, and the saying is subordinated to its theme" (2002a, p. 6). Our archeology of memory is the practice of subordinating the saying into its theme, of reconstructing the artifacts of saying found in memory so that they become the said. Saying while walking in flow is prelinguistic, a communication unfolding diachronically toward language. Once we have done the archeological reconstruction and articulate the memory in the said, we forget the prelinguistic expression of our body traversing a wilderness trail, of participation and saying with fellow creatures, and focus on the theme as if it were the essence of the happening.

In addition to specific memories being mischaracterized in the recollection, the description of flow as an experience is also fraught with hidden preconceptions and subordination into a theme. Because the memory is mine and I can recall it, I describe it

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as an experience. But a more careful scrutiny reveals the hidden preconception or the theme that subordinates. Levinas writes of experience:

> I can, no doubt, have an experience of another and 'observe' his face, and yet the knowledge gained in this way would be, if not actually misleading, nevertheless truncated as if the relationship with another were lost in the knowledge, which, here, can occur only through 'appresentation' and 'empathy' (*Einfühlung*) […] (1983, p. 108).

There seems to be a distinction between experience and the happening preceding that experience, some profound relation giving rise to empathy that cannot be reduced to knowledge, though through knowledge I attempt to encompass the happening, netting it in experience. Levinas goes on to write:

> What we take to be the secret of the other man in appresentation is precisely the hidden side of a meaning other than knowledge: awakening to the other man in his identity, an identity indiscernible for knowledge, thought in which the proximity of one's fellow is a source of meaning, 'commerce' with *the other* which cannot be reduced to experience, the *approach* of the other, of the first comer (1983, p. 109)

While it was happening, I was not throwing my net of knowledge over the event, I was not thinking it was an experience. Looking back, the memory is clearly my own, and no other shares in the recall of that memory, yet others are with me in the memory, with me in the happening, in the "proximity" of others we enacted meaning through fellowship. The memory of others with whom I was having a relationship, or a meeting, is better described in terms of participation or communion, a kind of mystical knowing.

Saint Paul points to this mystical participation (communion, fellowship) in his letter to the Philippians where he expresses his desire to know Christ (γνῶναι αὐτὸν) and the fellowship (κοινωνίαν) of his suffering (παθημάτων αὐτοῦ) becoming like him in his death (συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ) (3:10). This mystical participation is a "knowing" unlike other kinds of knowing, or what Levinas refers to as "the hidden side of a meaning other than knowledge" (1983, p. 109). "Knowing Him" (γνῶναι αὐτὸν) is a participation (κοινωνίαν) in his suffering (παθημάτων αὐτοῦ).

While it is happening the encounter itself is pre-intentional. As I describe it, looking back on the memory, I engage in an intentional act. I must take care in the description lest the intention translates the happening into my own experience. Levinas, in discussing substitution but applicable here, writes:

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> it cannot be defined in terms of intentionality, where undergoing is always also an assuming, that is, an experience always anticipated and consented to, already an origin and ἀρχή […] The given enters into a thought which recognizes in it or invests it with its own project, and thus exercises mastery over it (1989, p. 91).

Describing flow in terms of an experience mischaracterizes the happening, placing the hiker at the center, a self whose project shapes the meaning of the event, a self who is the sole author of the story. While flow is happening in the context of a long-distance hike, the one walking is not aware of an experience. There is no project, no author. The hiker is clearly conscious of the full surround, but that consciousness is not directed, there is no consciousness of, no intentionality; and neither is she self-conscious.

Kenosis

Kenosis is an emptying of one's self as center, as directing one's project, as authority, and placing one's self subject to others. Saint Paul introduces this to Christianity through his epistle to the Philippians:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself [ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν], taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. (2: 5-8)

Christ empties himself of his authority as being "in the form of God" and takes on another form without authority, one who does not direct his own project, humbling and subjecting himself to others until the very end. Interpreting this mythologically, and in line with Saint Paul's admonition to be of the "same mind" (φρονείσθω), we, human beings, could be emptied of our being — made in the image of God — and our authority therein to take dominion "over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26-28). Emptying our authority, we could serve the creatures of the earth as fellows, putting their interest before our own. As fellow creatures our relationship, one to another, would be in the form of Buber's I and Thou, unmediated, no intervening purpose directing one over the other.

Saint Paul's admonition could be interpreted as recommending a wilful act "to

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empty yourselves of yourselves," an action of humbling yourself. I take the opposite view, that self-emptying is not an enactment but a passive waiting. The only action is in resting, really an act of ceasing to act. In waiting we open ourselves to receiving the gift of being emptied, and in turn the gift of humbling and submitting. To wilfully submit is to retain some aspect of control, even if it is merely the act of submission. As noted already, Levinas writes, "the given enters into a thought which recognizes in it or invests it with its own project, and thus exercises mastery over it" (1989, p. 91). Beyond thought, the gift gives itself from itself. Marion writes, "Thinking about […] is one mode of givenness; it is another one altogether to find oneself in the presence of — what gives *itself*" (2002b, p. 29). When we reach out and take the gift, it ceases to be a gift; we make it our own, and it is no longer given. Grace as a given must be received passively as a gift in order for it to remain grace. Self-emptying as a gift is not the self emptying itself of itself, but the self being emptied by another who is gifting the self with a new form. In the death on the cross, Christ passively submits to the gift being given for the salvation of the other. If we empty ourselves, we are in some way still there through the act of self-emptying. Being there, we are, as Heidegger describes, *dasein*. Levinas notes that subjectivity begins on the hither side of being. In being self-emptied we receive the form of "the-one-for-the-other," not *dasein,* but "otherwise than being" (2002b).

Moving to "otherwise than being," kenosis does not void or annihilate the self in pursuit of mystical union. Buber points out two views of union wherein the relation between I and Thou are eliminated: "immersion or descent into the self" and when "the self is to be understood as the One that thinks and is" (1970, p. 131). He writes:

> The former view supposes that God will enter the being that has been freed of I-hood or that at that point one merges into God; the other view supposes that one stands immediately in oneself as the divine One. Thus the first holds that in a supreme moment all You-saying ends because there is no longer any duality; the second, that there is no truth in You-saying at all because in truth there is no duality. The first believes in the unification, the second in the identity of the human and the divine. Both insist on what is beyond I and You: for the first this comes to be perhaps in ecstasy, while for the second it is there all along and reveals itself, perhaps as the thinking subject beholds itself. Both annul relationship (1970, pp. 131-132).

The emptied self opens to relation with another. Levinas quotes Martin Buber, "'Man can become whole not by virtue of a relation to himself but only by virtue of a relation to another self'" (1989, p. 66). The other self is an alterity, neither the self-same nor

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thematized other.

Buber shows that "Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is 'in them' and not between them and the world. The world does not participate in experience" (1970, p. 56). Levinas contrasts Buber with Gabriel Marcel and shows a nuanced distinction helpful in this context. Participation for Marcel "is an intersubjective nexus deeper than the language that is torn away […] from that originative communication" (1993, p. 27). During the happening of flow, the hiker is not directing participation, which would be an example wherein "language petrifies living communication" but mutually and reciprocally participating, in an intersubjective meeting, an originating communication with an array of others.[1] Further, the hiker is not self-aware, that is "not aware of the awareness itself," and therefore does not have any sense of an experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 45). After the happening, while reflecting on it, the hiker characterizes it as an experience by projecting the reflection upon the memory of the happening. Buber contrasts this "internal" experience with encounter, which occurrs between I and You. In the meeting of I and You, or in the meeting happening in flow, there is a pre-intentional encounter.

The meeting is a happening and "cannot be found by seeking" (Buber, 1970, p. 62). It unfolds as a "deed of my whole being," and as an unmediated, or direct relationship, "passive and active at once" (p. 62). Buber describes this "concentration and fusion into a whole being" as "never accomplished by me," but "never accomplished without me" (p. 62). Experience being within versus between is mediated by the ego: Buber writes, "The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego [*eigenwesen*] and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use)" (pp. 111-112). The objects of experience are a means to some end, as involved in some purpose for the ego. Because experience is mediated, the ego does not participate in the world, or discover a meeting with another, and remains remote from the subjects of the world. The one who is experiencing, who is remote from the other as a subject, is not able to encounter another. The one experiencing is either reflecting, and therefore apart from the moment of encounter, or operating within a desire to use the other, an object for some end.

Encounter involves persons in relation with others—meeting one another reciprocally: "My You acts on me as I act on it" (p. 67). Buber illustrates meeting in contrast to experience in descripting his relation as a youth with a horse. In stroking the neck of this horse Buber seems to have had a profoundly mystical encounter, calling it a "deeply stirring happening" (1967, p. 23). This happening was a meeting with the Other,

[1] Levinas notes that "Marcel opposes language understood as the *element* of the Meeting; he opposes the very term *Relation*, preferring 'meeting' or 'tension'" (1993, p. 27). I will use both Buber and Marcel's terminology.

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"the immense otherness of the Other, which however, did not remain strange like the otherness of the ox and the ram, but rather let me draw near and touch it" (p. 23). In proximity and touching; both participate in the encounter, which unfolds reciprocally. Buber elaborates on the participation writing that in:

> the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of *Thou* and *Thou* with me (Buber, 1967, p. 23).

He writes that the two became fellow-conspirators and Buber felt approved. However, at some point while stroking the horse's neck on another occasion, Buber became conscious of his own hand. He writes, "I do not know what came over the child, at any rate it was childlike enough — it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand" (p. 23). In the consciousness of his own hand stroking the horse's neck something profound changed. The two ceased to be conspirators. Buber became self-conscious, and the horse became the object of his intended consciousness.

In relation to Buber's theory of knowledge rooted in the I-Thou versus I-it pairing Levinas writes:

> The I-Thou relation consists in the confronting a being external to oneself, i.e., one which is radically other, and in recognizing it as such. This recognition of otherness, however, is not to be confused with the *idea* of otherness. To have an idea of something is appropriate to the I-It relation (1989, p. 64).

Levinas points to the objectification of the other through conceptualizing. We can either encounter the radically other or self-consciously experience the other who has been transformed into an object of understanding. Levinas goes on to write:

> The being who is invoked in this relation is ineffable because the I speaks *to* him rather than *of* him and because in the latter case all contact is broken off with the Thou. To speak *to* him is to let him realize his own otherness. The I-Thou relation, therefore, escapes the gravitational field of the I-It in which the externalized object remains imprisoned (p. 64)

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William Cavanaugh points to this relational matrix in the context of pilgrimage writing:

> The pilgrim preserves otherness precisely by not seeking otherness for its own sake, but moving toward a common center to which an infinite variety of itineraries is possible. If God, the Wholly Other, is at the center, and not the great Western Ego, then there can be room for genuine otherness among human beings (2011, p. 83)

Kenotic walking opens up the possibility of this authentic and existential relation.

Saint Teresa of Avila, Ecstasy, and Flow

As already noted, Csikszentmihalyi points to religious "states of rapture" that share "characteristics of flow with play and creativity" (1975, p. 44). He writes:

> most states of religious ecstasy are reached by following complex ritual steps, yet for flow to be maintained, one cannot reflect on the act of awareness itself. The moment awareness is split so as to perceive the activity from "outside," the flow is interrupted (p. 45).

Saint Teresa's detailed description of her own ecstatic encounters with her Divine "His Majesty" evidence an absence of complex ritual steps, and rather than self-awareness, she discovers absorption in "states of rapture." She writes, "The senses are all occupied in this enjoyment in such a way that not one of them is at liberty to be able to attend to anything else, either outward or inward" (McGinn, 2006, p. 116). In addition, she practices careful attention to the description, bracketing conceptual framing and focusing instead on the encounter itself.

Conceptions of ecstasy explain it in terms of an experience of rising above or standing beyond oneself, or, of a radical immersion into oneself. Bracketing these conceptions Saint Teresa writes, "It is sometimes said that the soul enters within itself and sometimes that it rises above itself; but I cannot explain things in that kind of language, for I have no skill in it" (1999, p. 40). She limits herself to a careful description, free from conceptions, writing of absorption that:

> When His Majesty wants to suspend understanding, He busies it in another way and sheds light on a knowing so far above what we can achieve that He leaves it

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> absorbed, and then, without knowing how, it ends up better instructed than all of our strivings to hold it still (2020).

Being left "absorbed" transcends conceptual frames, resisting thematization such that the soul "should not try to understand what this state is" (1999, p. 43). Saint Teresa's description is not an explanation: "How this prayer they call union happens and what it is, I cannot explain. Mystical theology explains it, and I am unable to use the proper terms" (2006, p. 116). Is she unable, or simply approaching "it" from another point of view? In this same vein she writes of not succeeding in describing such things "in such a way as to be understood, except by those who have experienced it" (1999, pp. 75-76).

Her description can be interpreted as a phenomenological bracketing allowing the thing in question to give itself from itself. Her care in describing calls attention to Marion's fourth and final formulation of phenomenology, "as much reduction, as much givenness" (2002, p. 17). Her qualification of understanding brings to mind Merleau-Ponty's characterization of phenomenological description, "To turn back to the things themselves is to return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks" (1956, p. 60). Absorption precedes knowledge but has been thematized in such a way as to produce various methods with the purpose of leading practitioners into the experience. Knowledge translates being absorbed into a "state of absorption," but Saint Teresa turns back to that which precedes experience, to allow the encounter to give itself from beyond conceptions.

In addition to bracketing conceptions, Saint Teresa combines this practice with a negation of "complex ritual steps," or what I refer to as techniques for obtaining flow, ecstasy, or rapture. She writes, "Do not suppose that the understanding can attain to Him, merely by trying to think of Him as within the soul, or the imagination, by picturing Him as there" (1999, p. 41). Her negation excludes techniques for attaining communion with God and instead highlights the particular prayer practice that opens one to absorption. On the other hand, she does say that there are "excellent" practices of meditation, "founded upon a truth" of God being "within us" (p. 41). Even though this is a truth, the prayer she describes "is quite different" (p. 41). This prayer is not a wilful enactment leading to absorption; she writes, "With us it is not a question of our will — it happens only when God is pleased to grant us this favour" (p. 41). A wilful act or an enactment of a set of "complex ritual steps," an employment of techniques, places the practitioner in the center and the one invoked as an object of manipulation. Just as long-distance hiking and pilgrimage open those engaged to a happening of flow, Saint Teresa points to a way of opening oneself to an encounter with God, "One preparation for listening to Him, as certain books tell us, is that we should contrive, not to use our

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reasoning powers, but to be intent upon discovering what the Lord is working in the soul" (p. 41). Just as with flow, the discovery happens afterward in the careful description of memory, in bracketing conceptions in order to reveal what the other has done, whether the other is God, as Saint Teresa describes, or fellows both human and extra-human along a wilderness trail.

Saint Teresa's description of her own mystical encounter shows an ecstatic negation of self-consciousness, or an ego-less passion, in conjunction with avoidance of techniques conducive to the encounter. By surrendering even the desire for the "greater glory of God" we are lead into a much higher degree of knowledge. She writes:

> the very effort which the soul makes in order to cease from thought will perhaps awaken thought and cause it to think a great deal […] how can a person be forgetful of himself when he is taking such great care about his actions that he dare not even stir, or allow his understanding and desires to stir, even for the purpose of desiring the greater glory of God or of rejoicing in the glory which is His?" (1999, p. 43)

Toward this higher degree of knowledge, she says that the soul should try "without forcing itself" "to put a stop to all discursive reasoning, yet not to suspend the understanding, nor cease from all thought" (p. 43). Her recommendation involves suspending a way of knowing but remaining open to thought. The negation of discursive reasoning voids self-consciousness as a center of knowing. Remaining open to thought indicates that absorption is not self-oblivion but a possible approach to non-discursive communication. This is similar to flow in that the hiker remains fully aware while walking but thoughts are not self-generated.

Though Levinas casts the mystic project as "idealist, solipsist, amoral" (Rigby, 2011), his description of substitution sheds light on Saint Teresa's exposition of absorption. Rather than a knowing, her rapture can be interpreted as proximity. Levinas writes:

> in starting with sensibility interpreted not as a knowing but as proximity, in seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes, we have endeavoured to describe subjectivity as irreducible to consciousness and thematization. Proximity appears as the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into 'images' or be exposed to a theme (1989, p. 89).

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He goes on to call "this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession" (p. 90). It is irreducible even though it "overwhelms" consciousness (p. 91). "It undoes thematization, and escapes any *principle*, origin, will, or ἀρχή, which are put forth in every ray of consciousness" (p. 91). Obsession is an "inversion of consciousness" and a "passivity beneath all passivity. It cannot be defined in terms of intentionality" (p. 91). In intentionality "the given enters into a thought which recognizes in it or invests it with its own project, and thus exercises mastery over it" (p. 91). In this way "The *for itself* in consciousness is thus the very power which a being exercises upon itself, its will, its sovereignty" (p. 91). With the obsession, "the consciousness is affected, then, before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself […] being called into question prior to questioning" (p. 92). "Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act" (p. 107). Absorption and rapture, like kenotic walking, are acts of ceasing to act - resting, waiting.

Further elaborating on the passivity of waiting Saint Teresa notes that the encounter happens "when a person is quite unprepared […] and not even thinking of God, he is awakened (1999, p. 76). He does not waken himself but is moved from beyond himself to wakefulness. The call comes from the other who is not me, and I recognize that it is not my own inner voice but another. She writes, "the soul is aware that it has been called by God […] it begins to tremble" (p. 76). In this case the soul recognizes the wholly other and so trembles, encompassed by rapture, "so clearly conscious is it of the presence of its God" (p. 77). She writes of the encounter that the person "is conscious of having been most delectably wounded, but cannot say how or by whom but it is certain that this is a precious experience and it would be glad if it were never to be healed of that wound" (p. 76). She could be alluding to a mystical participation (communion, fellowship) in Christ's suffering and death, as we already explored in Saint Paul's letter to the Philippians.

In her participation in Christ's suffering, passion (πάθημα), she uses phrases reciprocally juxtaposed such as "great grief" and "sweet and delectable" to describe the ineffable and sublime encounter of rapture. In her clear description, seemingly inspirational for Bernini's sculpture located in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome (Fig. 1), she writes, "I know that this distress seems to penetrate to its very bowels" (p. 77). "*Sé que parece que le llega a las entrañas esta pena*" (2016, p. 174). She continues, "when He that has wounded it draws out the arrow, the bowels seem to come with it, so deeply does it feel this love" (1999, p. 77). "*Cuando de ellas saca la saeta el que la hiere, verdaderamente parece que se las lleva tras sí, según el sentimiento de amor siente*" (2016, p. 174). She continues:

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> the fire is not hot enough to burn it up, and the experience is very delectable, the soul continues to feel the pain and the mere touch suffices to produce that effect in it […] this delectable pain, which is not really pain, is not continuous: sometimes it lasts for a long time, while sometimes it comes suddenly to an end […] for it is a thing which no human means can procure. Although occasionally the experience lasts for a certain length of time, it goes and comes again […] never permanent […] and leaves the soul yearning once again to suffer that loving pain of which it is the cause (p. 77).

Bernini's sculpture is beautiful and draws onlookers into the small chapel to gaze at his depiction of Saint Teresa's ecstatic vision. Even though their gaze focuses on a master work of art, the sculpture fails to communicate her carefully articulated description. In reality the image captures the audience's visual attention in a kind of mirror. One aspect of the mirror is that Bernini's work obscures the aim of Saint Teresa's description. She is pointing to an encounter with transcendence, a mystic communion. She does not call

Figure 1: Bernini's Ecstasy of Saint Teresa

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attention to her rhetoric but continues to point to an alterity, the wholly other who touches her with love. Bernini's beautiful sculpture causes us to praise his skill as an artist. We are looking at his imagined interpretation chiseled in stone. We gaze at the human, looking into a mirror at ourselves; our look cannot penetrate the opaque marble and bring us into communion with mystery.

Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between idol and icon helps us here. He writes, "the idol and the icon are distinguishable […] inasmuch as each makes use of its visibility in its own way" (2012, p. 9). Bernini's sculpture works in the same way that Marion describes the working of the idol, which "fascinates and captivates the gaze precisely because everything in it must expose itself to the gaze, attract, fill, and hold it" (p. 10). The idol places the one gazing upon it in an experience of their own making. Saint Teresa shows the reader that she is not in control, she does not make the experience, while it unfolds, it is not an experience. She is in communion with "His Majesty," not experiencing the wholly other but participating in love, which is a meeting of the two. Marion writes, "The idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the gaze's image, or more exactly, the image of its aim and of the scope of that aim" (2012, p. 12). There is no meeting between an idol and the one who gazes. There is only the one gazing back at their own gaze.

While Saint Teresa has painstakingly qualified her experience and incorporated a nuanced communication involving the ephemerality of time and feeling, Bernini fixes the experience into a state, freezes it into a moment so that those looking at the sculpture might linger over the experience, make it their own. Looking at the sculpture is singularly pleasurable. Looking into the eyes of your lover, who looks back at you, involves two in an encounter. Saint Teresa's encounter with "His Majesty" is both "delectable" and painful, ingulfed in a fire hot enough to bring suffering and at the same time love. The sculpture attempts to communicate these contrasting feelings, but those gazing can only look on from without, experience the ecstasy from a safe distance, and only within themselves rather than in a meeting. Magnifying this effect, Bernini includes a gallery of onlookers, witnessing her ecstatic vision. They are depicted interacting with one another while marveling at the angel preparing to thrust his dart into the reclining Saint. They engage in a mutual admiration of the idol, a mirror reflecting their own souls.

Saint Teresa's encounter results from a kind of iconic prayer. Marion writes, "The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one." Her self-emptying prayer is a waiting. She has continually reiterated that she does not cause the encounter. "The icon is not seen, but appears, or more originally seems, looks like" (2012, p. 17). Saint Teresa cannot explain the encounter, she only gives us a "seeming," a "looks like." Marion writes, "Whereas the idol results from the gaze that aims at it, the icon summons sight in letting

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the visible . . be saturated little by little with the invisible" (p. 17). Marion's description shows how Saint Teresa encounters her "His Majesty" wounding her in love, "the icon opens in a face that gazes at our gazes in order to summon them to its depth" (p. 19).

Wilderness as Idol or Icon

Both religious mystics and pilgrim/hikers, absorbed or walking self-emptying, encounter others as subjects, meeting empathetically in communion. Some pilgrim/hikers never discover flow, remain self-conscious throughout their journey. Like Bernini's gallery of onlookers, they look on and experience scenery, admiring the sublime. Their gaze is intentional, a consciousness of the other, which places them in the center, around whom the other as object orbits an ego. In a previous publication I asked, might an "interpretation of the wild as sublime be another conceptual strategy toward taming the wild? Are wilderness trekkers really domesticating the wild, establishing their dominance over raw and strange environments" (Redick, 2018, p. 82)? One concept, encompassing a human orientation toward the scenic environment, is that of "nature." Nature is conceived, an abstraction that facilitates human manipulations of their environmental placement. The concept of nature brings with it a thematized divide between human beings and the rest of the cosmos, the nature culture divide. This divide only exists conceptually, anthropomorphizing the other.

In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis asks what "is Nature? Where is she? Who has seen her? What does she do? In answer to this question he writes, "The pre-Socratic philosophers of Greece invented Nature […] the great variety of phenomena which surrounds us could all be impounded under a name and talked about as a single object" (1994, p. 37). We have no concrete, lived experience nor communion with nature. Such communion would be a participation with one's own self or with the abstraction of humanity, koinonia with an idea.

Communion happens in wholeness, one's whole being participates, meeting with the other. While engaging in communion, their saying disrupts sedimented or thematized conceptual frames of understanding, the said. These conceptual frames are the focus of Gadamer's hermeneutical reflection, applied to "the kind of concealment through language that determines one's whole relationship to the world" (1977, p. 92). Preconceptions remain hidden, and as noted earlier in the essay, Gadamer writes that disruption makes us conscious of prejudices (p. 92). An irruption of kenotic walking disrupts. In reflecting on the irruption, we open ourselves to uncovering conceptual frames of understanding through translation. Gadamer writes, "Translation allows what is foreign and what is one's own to merge in a new form by defending the point of the other

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even if it be opposed to one's own view" (p. 94). Our encounters during the irruption of kenotic walking happen beyond language, beyond concepts that makes objects of others. We fellowship extra verbally and are awakened to a kind of communication that is foreign. In reflecting on the walk, we engage in translation and might employ hermeneutical reflection, further disrupting intended meanings.

Nature functions as an idol rather than an icon. It is a mirror into which we look back at ourselves. The aesthetic tourist interacts with nature like one who peers at Bernini's sculpture of Saint Teresa. Pilgrim/hikers do not find fellowship (relation, meeting, communion) with nature but with the other, particular constituents of an ecological place, an eco-place: The orientation of aesthetic tourists involves experiencing rather than encountering the other in ecoplaces, immediate geographical areas wherein the hiker walks, which is also encompassed by a larger ecoregion.[2] The other within a particular ecoplace is home, and pilgrim/hikers are guests in the home, recipients of hospitality.

Hospitality

While on their journey pilgrim/hikers are liminal. Leaving their own dwelling places, they become strangers. As strangers they become open to what Derrida refers to as unconditional hospitality. Tourists, on the other hand, participate in conditional hospitality, established by institutions of the recreation industry. Tourism ambiguates hospitality because recreation companies self-reference as operating within the hospitality industry. This "hospitality" operates in economic exchange and negates the gift of hospitality. Marion writes, "the gift begins and in fact ends as soon as the giver envisions that he owes something to someone, when he admits that he could be a debtor, and thus a recipient" (2008, p. 91). The giver in this exchange, the recreation establishment, becomes bound to giving in that the giver becomes a debtor through the commodification of the gift. Marion explains that this annuls the gift because, "it does not belong to the economy of exchange" (p. 96). Hospitality becomes similar to other economic exchanges. Derrida writes:

> absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner […] but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I

[2] Ecoplaces are encompassed by larger ecoregions. Ecoregion is defined as a "relatively large units of land containing a distinct assemblage of natural communities and species, with boundaries that approximate the original extent of natural communities prior to major land-use change" (2001, p. 933).

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> offer them without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names (2000, p. 25).

Pilgrim/hikers as liminal open themselves to receiving hospitality. Tourists retain status and enact an exchange. Though both pilgrim/hikers and tourists travel beyond their places of dwelling, they occupy different spaces.

Conclusion

Scenic tourists colonize with their gaze and so perceive the surround as nature; they are in natural space. Pilgrim/hikers walk through the home of the other, an ecoplace. Ecology is a metaphorical concept indicating the web of interconnections. Conceptually it has been thematized, consisting of layers of representation. Kenotic walking serves to disrupt representations, returning to the metaphor's lively way of showing interconnections between whole beings in their lived situations. Buber writes that "I and You can only be spoken with one's whole being. I and It can never be spoken with one's whole being" (1970, p. 54). One's whole being manifests in the encounter of I and You. In kenotic walking, as has been shown, encounters happen between whole beings in their meeting one with another.

We have engaged in a unique archeology, digging down into memory to uncover an interaction between a pilgrim/hiker and the ecological surround. Levinas has shown us that our responsibility to others lies deeper still. We must dig below history to that which precedes our activity, where we find a trace of the anarchic responsibility of the one-for-another, only appearing when we are in proximity to the other as an obsession. In kenotic walking the archeology lifts away the self as center, as sole arbiter of meaning. In reflection, afterward, the hiker finds that the trace of the one-for-the-other gives rise to the one-with-the-other, a realization of fellowship, communion, participation with human and extra-human in their ecological placement.

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The MA in Ecology and Spirituality: Background and Interview with Dr. Andy Letcher

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The following transcript is from an interview that I recorded with Dr. Andy Letcher for the *One School One Planet* podcast in 2018,[1] long before I knew that I would become involved in the MA programme myself. The programme has evolved considerably since its first incarnation, not least because it is now a purely online course taught via The Sophia Centre, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, where originally it had been a residential course taught at Schumacher College in Dartington, Devon. The interview has been included here because it gives a good flavour of the kinds of conversations and debates that the MA seeks to engage. There is a link at the bottom of this article to find out more about the MA. In the meantime, I hope you find this snapshot of interest.

Schumacher College

Jack: Can you tell us a little about the Schumacher College itself, what it is, how it came about, and what the curriculum is like?

Andy: For people who don't know, Schumacher College is a small independent college down in the Southwest of England, and it was set up some twenty-five years ago as part of the Dartington Estate. Dartington is this experiment in alternative education, arts, right livelihood, agriculture, and so on, that was set up in the 1920s by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst. Schumacher College was later set up by Satish Kumar, who many people will know as a peace activist, ecologist and someone who is very interested in Permaculture, Education and Cultural Change alternative

[1] The interview was first broadcast on the One School One Planet podcast (https://www.mixcloud.com/oneschooloneplanet/one-school-one-planet-podcast-episode-5/), and was later published in Jones & Hunter (2019).

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education. So it was a natural place for this college to be part of the Dartington experiment.

The college has a reputation for teaching ecology, green approaches to business and economics, to philosophy. It runs a whole load of short courses, and is run along the same principles as an Ashram, so that everyone who is here works to help the place function – and that involves cooking food, cleaning toilets, doing all that kind of stuff. We also run a series of Masters programmes, one of which, and the most recent addition, is the MA in Ecology and Spirituality. People have the option of coming here for six months and really diving into the debate on where ecology and spirituality meet and what the relationship between these two things might be.

The Programme

Jack: Great! Can you tell us about the MA programme?

Andy: I guess the rationale behind the programme is that a lot of people have the intuition that the ecological crisis has something to do with a crisis of spirituality. That it's something about how our worldview and our values have led us into this position of climate change and species loss, and so on and so forth – I don't need to repeat the litany of things that are going wrong at the moment. So we take that as a starting point, and really we generate far more questions than we answer.

There are many scholarly definitions of spirituality, but I see spirituality as a living inquiry into the sacred, the numinous, however that is beheld, and I guess I see what we are doing as some kind of living inquiry into what that has to do with ecology. For example, we look at what ecology is. We're not teaching the science of ecology here, even though that is one of my backgrounds, we're looking at it as a cultural phenomenon, as a thing that humans do in the West and what assumptions are implicit in that. Why have we come to the point that we have a culture that does ecology? We look, for example, at the founder of ecology, Ernst Haeckl, the biologist who gave us the term. He was a nineteenth century German zoologist, and he was very much a Darwinian, but he also felt that there was a spiritual knowing to be had through understanding the scientific laws of the universe. A very interesting guy!

So it's almost right from the foundations of ecology we find that spirituality is bound up with it. But then we expand our discussion to ask: what would happen if we were to extend Western philosophy to include ecological awareness, can we

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do that? What happens if we look to Deep Ecology, or biocentric ethics, or eco-centric ethics? How far does that take us? And then, we go: OK, maybe Western ways of thinking are part of the problem, what happens if we start listening to indigenous voices (the most marginalised voices of all)? What happens if we start taking those voices seriously? Can we do that? Can we do it in a way that doesn't continue the imperialist, colonialist project? And then, the end of the course, which is called 'Sacred Activism,' is really asking people what are you going to do with this understanding? You've fortified your understanding of the world by studying spirituality and ecology, but now what are you going to do with it? Are you going to write some kind of amazing App that's going to change the world, or are you going to go and introduce mindfulness into your place of work, are you going to write a book, or what? How do we affect change in the world? Is it problematic when we do try to affect change in the world, because of the inevitable shadows we cast whenever we try to do anything?

Jack: Wow, that sounds like an incredible course.

Andy: It's a very rich course, and we mix traditional academic book learning, thinking and discussion with experiential learning and emergent learning that arises from the group. There's a certain amount of people like me giving lectures, but then we flip the classroom and we wait and see what emerges from the collective wisdom of the group, and that's always an exciting moment. Just as I defined spirituality as a living inquiry, that's what we're doing – we're trying to keep this alive. Because I don't have the answers, I'm in it as much as the students.

A Spiritual Response to the Ecological Crisis?

Jack: It's really interesting stuff! I've got one more question that we can use to round off our discussion, and that is: how can focusing on spirituality lead to practical, real world, solutions to problems?

Andy: That's a really really good question. Well, on a very pragmatic level, in spite of the dominant atheist worldview within the academy and in mainstream Western intellectual culture, there's an awful lot of religionists out there. So a very pragmatic answer would be that if you can get people of religion interested in ecology and the ecological crisis, then that's an awful lot of people that can affect change in the world. But I think you're asking something deeper…

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Jack: Yes…

Andy: ...which is, what happens if we come at the world with a spiritual worldview? Is there some other kind of change that occurs? I'm a card carrying animist, by which I mean – for me, what is important is the interrelationships with all the other people in the world. By people I don't just mean human people, I mean tree-people, I mean weather-people, I mean plant-people.

Jack: Yeah.

Andy: It's a subtle shift, but if you start to try and think like an animist (and to be honest it has been the predominant worldview – the scientific worldview is a bit of an anomaly), then you are constantly in relationship with people, you are constantly in relationship with a community of people. Agency is no longer something that I possess, it is something we possess. The apple tree possesses agency when it tempts me to take its fruit and scatter its seeds. It is a subtle thing, but I think it starts to change the way we interact with the world by seeing it as radically alive, radically full of agency, and there's a possibility there for the emergence of new ways of being, which emerge kind of like a murmuration. If you watch a murmuration of starlings, these big flocks of starlings that you see on a winter's evening, there's no-one in control, and yet somehow this great flock of birds weaves these great complex shapes in the sky. Or maybe, if we started to behave as though the world is full of agency, we can find new ways of being in the world that we couldn't possibly have conceive of before.

Jack: Bringing it back to the school context, what methods are there to encourage young people to have at least an awareness that this other way of living in the world is possible?

Andy: Hmm, that's a huge question!

Jack: Yeah. Well, one of the things we do on our project is taking kids down to work in the community orchard and herb garden, getting them to feel the soil and to work with the trees, and build up a physical (and later maybe emotional and spiritual) relationship in that way.

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Andy: Well, I think that's vital. There's a book that came out many years ago now called Loving Nature by an anthropologist Kay Milton, who was interested in why some people are motivated to become environmental activists. They generally say that they do so out of love, you know, they love nature, they love the outdoors and the wild. So she's interested in why some people express that love and other people don't, and her answer was that it is to do with exposure during childhood. So I think the difficulty is that we live in increasingly abstracted worlds. We live in urban worlds, but abstracted because everything is mediated through screens and devices. I think what you're doing is absolutely vital – sharing that passion for the soil, for trees, for the return of the chiff-chaff in spring, or the first fruiting in the autumn. But how we affect that change in a large way, I'm still looking for the answer. All we can do is what we can do, and I think that what you're doing is part of the answer.

Jack: And what you're doing is part of the answer too!

The Current Incarnation

Since October 2020 the MA has been taught fully online through the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, with Prof. Nicholas Campion as the Programme Director and me (Jack Hunter) as lead tutor. The core module for the MA - actually called 'Ecology and Spirituality' - is a ten week course that introduces key concepts, topics and debates in the study of the relationship between ecology and spirituality in all of its various forms. Themes for the ten weeks include: What is Ecology?, What is Spirituality?, Symptoms of and responses to the ecological crisis, Dark Green Religion and Nature Spirituality, The Ecological Self, The Non-Human, Greening the Paranormal, Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Sacred Activism. Other module options on the MA include: 'Sacred Geography,' 'Sacred Skies,' 'Researching Contemporary Cosmologies,' 'Environmental Philosophy,' 'Cosmology Magic and Divination' and 'Religious Experience Today.' To find out more about the MA visit:

https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/ma-ecology-spirituality/

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Student Feedback for 2020-21 Core Module

"I really enjoyed this module and the way it was delivered...It was great. Thank you!"

"I...was impressed by the quality and enthusiasm of the lecturers."

"Awesome !!"

"I loved this module. There was a wealth of information and resources provided...I feel as if the new knowledge I gained during these 10 weeks applies to nearly every situation in life; I am constantly thinking of what I learned...I learned so much while completing our assignments, and I found the feedback extremely helpful and constructive. I feel so fortunate to be a part of this MA programme! That feeling was more than confirmed while taking this course."

"This was an excellent course, taught with enthusiasm and to a very high academic standard. All the tutors and course leader were very inspiring and clear communicators...This course surpassed my expectations...Overall, excellent!"

Guest Lectures

For those who might be interested in following up on some of the ideas explored on the MA, we are very pleased to be able to share a number of guest lecture videos on our YouTube channel. To date we have lectures from: Dr. Andy Letcher on 'Ecology and Spirituality,' Dr. Renee E. Mazinegiizhigoo-kwe Bedard presenting her paper from this issue, Dr. Patrick Curry on 'Ethical Responses to the Ecological Crisis,' and Dr. Julia Wright on the concept of 'Subtle Agroecologies.' There will be more guest lectures to come in the future. All videos can be watched at the following link:

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL7FSKERTYn-dQ8zJRamd37tEgfaVnXCSF

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Biographies

Aitor Boada-Benito holds a degree in Classical Philology and a Master's degree in Religious Studies (Complutense University, Madrid). He has participated in conferences both at a national and international level; he has also contributed to academic journals and collective volumes. Currently, he is a PhD student in Religious Studies at Complutense University, Madrid. His research focuses on Christian religious identity in early medieval literature, in particular the study of hagiographic testimonies written during the Sassanian Empire. The main part of his project considers the suffering body of the martyrs and the body of the audience as key parts in the development of a religious identity.

Renaud Evrard, PhD., is Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Lorraine (Nancy). He is the co-founder of the Center for Information, Research and Counseling on Exceptional Experiences, author/editor of several books on the clinical, historical, anthropological, and sociological approaches to exceptional experiences. He is the current President of the Parapsychological Association.

R Murray Fehr is an independent researcher and writer originally from Southern Ontario. He has a PhD in Environmental Studies, and has a publishing record exploring the intersections of Indigenous and settler peoples in the lower Great Lakes.

Jack Hunter, PhD., is an anthropologist exploring the borderlands of consciousness, religion, ecology and the paranormal. He is an Honorary Research Fellow with the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, and a tutor with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, where he teaches on the MA in Ecology and Spirituality and the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. He is a Research Fellow with the Parapsychology Foundation. In 2010 he founded *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal*. He is the author of *Spirits, Gods and Magic* (2020) and *Manifesting Spirits* (2020), and is the editor of *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), *Damned Facts* (2016) and *Talking with the Spirits* (2014).

Andy Letcher, PhD., is Programme Lead on the MA in Engaged Ecology and Senior Lecturer on the MSc in Holistic Science at Schumacher College. After a brief spell studying physics and astronomy, Andy Letcher completed a degree in Ecology at Sheffield University, then a doctorate in Ecology at Oxford. It was as an eco-activist in the 1990s that he was invited to do a second PhD in the Study of Religion at King Alfred's College, Winchester. He is especially interested in the tangled and sometimes tortuous relationship between science and spirituality, and in so-called dark green religion. He has written papers on: the distribution of mammals across continents; fairies; mysticism; and psychedelic spirituality. He is the author of Shroom: A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom
(link is external).

Renée E. Mazinegiizhigoo-kwe Bédard is of Anishinaabeg, Kanien'kehá:ka, and French-Canadian ancestry. She is a member of Okikendawdt (Dokis First Nation). She holds a Ph.D. from Trent University in Indigenous Studies. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor at Western University in the Faculty of Education. Her areas of publication include practices of Anishinaabeg motherhood, maternal philosophy and spirituality, along with environmental issues, women's rights, Indigenous Elders, Anishinaabeg artistic expressions, and Indigenous education.

Kip Redick, PhD., is Professor and Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Christopher Newport University. Professional interests include pilgrimage studies, spiritual journey, spirituality of place, media ecology; visual, religious, and environmental rhetoric; and film studies. His specific research interest centers on the study of wilderness trails as sites of spiritual journey.

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