

**A THEOPOETICS OF THE EARTH:
Divinity, Multiplicity, and Epiphany in the Anthropocene**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Division of Religion
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ABSTRACT

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Ph.D. Dissertation by

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Global warming elicits theological and ethical problems largely unimagined by human beings and intensifies contexts of injustice: erratic weather, decline in biodiversity, water scarcity, food shortages, and displacements of human and nonhuman creatures. Environmental activist and writer Bill McKibben calls our new situation a “tough new planet,” and some scholars now call our geologic time the Anthropocene—the time of humans.¹ Global warming is no longer a problem to be “prevented” but a reality already upon us, challenging senses of communal solidarity, justice, and resilience. Drawing on the fields of Anthropocene Studies, new materialisms, ecotheology, ecological ethics and other environmental humanities, this dissertation constructs a new theology, indeed a theopoetics of the earth that might help cultivate stories and strategies of relational resilience. It argues that theology must take the manifold relationships of earth and divinity in the midst of this reality seriously by acknowledging theology’s poietic formation in earthy and material places. Taking the motifs of “theophany”

¹ Bill McKibben. *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Times Books, 2010.

and “epiphany” (divinity manifest in place) as a joint starting point, this dissertation argues that the traditions of theophany might help signify a mutual and mutually creative relationship between manifold divinity and earth. Drawing especially on the ninth century Irish mystic John Scottus Eriugena’s perspective that all of creation, including the earth, are theophanies, the self-creation of God, this dissertation constructs via “speculative fabulation” (Donna Haraway) a “theophanic conviviality” where divinity and earth irreducibly interrelate, and so illuminate the unruly agency of materiality. This writing further demonstrates that, in the Anthropocene, it takes a “theophanic attention” to wrestle with environmental despair and the tragic beauty of ecology honestly. Finally, this dissertation argues for an “epiphanic commons,” where theophanic creatures work together in convivial lines of solidarity and cooperative justice.

For the Erickson Diamond T

“Dakota is everywhere.
A condition.
And I am only a device of memory
To call forth into this Present the flowering dead and the living.”

- Thomas McGrath,
Letter to an Imaginary Friend

“Mni Ki Wakan.”

- Water Protectors at Standing Rock, North Dakota

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Prelude: In the Wake Of...

This writing is the first, fragile utterance of a number of years' thinking on the role theology might play on what Bill McKibben calls a "tough new planet." Theology wrapped itself deep in my bones from a young age, firing my inquiries and driving my imagination to new forms and new contexts. The horizontal world of the North Dakota prairie offered a democratic and expansive set of cosmological metaphors for divine immanence in the world. The activism of indigenous Water Protectors and others at the nearby Fort Berthold and Standing Rock Reservations witness to environmental injustices in that space. I hold those two witnesses to divine immanence and environmental justice together in mind as I write. My environmental journey came later, as I began to feel deeply an upwelling sense of this tough new planet. Earth burst through, living and dead, as I journeyed in through my undergraduate theology degree at St. Olaf College, my affinities between the School of Divinity and the School of Forestry at Yale University, and finally culminating in this work, the work that Drew University so expertly encouraged in me.

Newness, however, is not always a blessing and the processes of time are just as much tragic as they are creative. As I began this work, a number of deep losses aggregated in my spirit: My grandfather and the trickster-patriarch of the Diamond T Ranch, Larry Erickson, died suddenly. A dear mentor and guide, Pastor Jennifer Koenig, died far too young. A relationship that upheld so much of my life's sense of order all the way down to every scratch of the pen taken, every word typed, unraveled. My depression quite often unraveled my sense of self-worth, value, meaning, and threaten to unravel any desire to continue. And all the while I was reading about mass extinctions, the growth of new diseases, radical environmental injustices, and

atmospheric compositions that make untimely losses accelerate and dig deeper into the flesh of the world.

One of the difficulties in reading about global warming—that tough new planet—is that one often feels more impactfully the new selves we are. We are in denial, grief, and mourning, overwhelmed by ethical commitments, anxious about our own meaning, vocation, and worth. And many of us find ourselves often unable to bear the ecological tragedies of this moment.

The writing of this project became all the more important to me, then. Its chapters became about touching and cultivating resilience in ourselves, in our communities, and seeing resilience in the planet when everything seems to be going apocalyptic in a Hollywood sense. My writing became, as Joanna Macy says, a vital part of the “working through environmental despair,” just as any Christian theologian might work through their own salvation in fear and trembling. The chapters that you’ll find below are chapters that each, on their own and collectively, mark my thinking about a theo-poetics of the earth as a constructive cultivation of planetary resilience. If religion binds creatures together, resilience might be what holds us together and becomes the genesis of creativity.

I’m unwilling to call my poetics here a redemption narrative, because resilience signals the frustrating persistence of unwieldy structures of injustice, violence, feelings of being overwhelmed, ethical complexity beyond our scopes, and more. I also cannot believe in redemption narratives. But sometimes divinity bursts into those places and wraps into creativity that, as womanist theologians and others might say, “makes a way out of no way.” My writing here performs that for me the best it can. And if some re-envisioning of our planetary context bursts through, then I will mourn and celebrate that connection with you, dear reader.

Resilience also is never alone, and our bodies entangle and are upheld by one another. Energies come in communities, contexts, and planetary exchanges. Writing always emerges from a planetary genesis collective. In my case, I am blessed with the manifold. My family, Jon and Eleanor, Luke and Hannah, have all contributed their own ideas, work and art to this writing in ways known and unknown. But without their unwavering encouragement, late night phone calls, family and friendship, I don't know what I'd do with myself, for they make up my relational self.

I'm grateful to the members of the Van Buren and friends, and the friendship that I know will help bear through any planetary storm: Rob, Sarah, Taylor, Marc, Matthew, Maureen, Thomas, Abigail, Erin, Caleb, Bryan, Suzi, Emily, and Becca. I love you more than words can express, and I'm so privileged to get to spend my life with you in all of the friendship that our chosen kin offer.

I'm grateful to the communities that support me, spiritually and communally along this path: Saron Lutheran Church, Zion Lutheran Church, and Mercy Seat Lutheran Church, where I served as a spontaneously named "Ecotheologian in Residence." Mercy Seat, the Minneapolis Synod, the St. Paul Synod, and Southeastern Minnesota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America all graciously invited me to speak and test out these ideas along the way.

Special thanks must be given to St. Olaf College and the Religion Department past and present there. I have not known finer teachers of biblical texts, religion, and theology, ones that continue to aid in my theological reflection: Maggie Odell, L. DeAne Lagerquist, Charles A. Wilson, David Booth, Trish Beckman, William Poehlmann, Elizabeth Galbraith, James Hanson, Anant Rambachan, Greg Walter, Doug Schuurman, and Jamie Schillinger. Pastor Bruce Benson, alongside Jennifer Koenig, at St. Olaf's Boe Chapel, gave me a home to think about faith in ways

I hadn't experienced before. And alongside his chapel talks, interning with Larry Rasmussen at an ecologically themed conference on worship and the arts remains a pinnacle of my time at St. Olaf.

I'm grateful to colleagues for years of support, critique, and collaboration from members of the Keller Collective. I'm thankful especially for Natalie Williams, Terra Rowe, Dawn Martin, Sam Laurent, Amanullah De Sony, Marion Grau, and Siobhán Garrigan. Collaboration, not competition, is the only way that a meaningful academy will survive, and I'm grateful for colleagues who model this on a day-to-day basis. The members of the Sacred Texts, Theory, and Theological Construction Unit of the American Academy of Religion, the Unit which I co-chair, has become a second academic home for me.

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Thank you. I'm a theologian only because your words remind me time and time again that I can be with the fragile courage I have. I'm grateful for our conviviality and everything I learn from you in this life of becoming. Resilience, indeed.

Chapter 1
Divinity in the Anthropocene: Listening for Traces of an Eartheology

“When Christian orthodoxy refuses to articulate a theology for earth, the clamant hurt of God’s ancient creation is not thereby silenced.”

- Joseph Sittler, “A Theology for Earth”²

“there are sounds the planet will always make, even if there is no one to hear them.”

- Jorie Graham, “No Long Way Round”³

Listening on a New Planet

Sometimes it helps to begin with old stories. In the beginning of his richly poetic *Biogea*, the philosopher Michel Serres begins to tell a story that sounds both hauntingly familiar and strikingly new. The story is written almost like a fairy tale, familiar in tone but unclear where or when the tale takes place. The actions and characters drive the story, and we’re brought into the heart of the action: “We made fun of him, old Taciturn; we thought he was cracked, driven crazy by strange mania.”⁴ A narrator, unknown—a fictionalization of Serres, himself, perhaps—

² Joseph Sittler, “A Theology for Earth” in *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*. Eds. Stephen Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Press, 2000: 25.

³ Jorie Graham, *Sea Change*. Ecco, 2009.

⁴ Michel Serres. *Biogea*. Trans. Randolph Burke. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2012: 1.

recalls the oddity of observing a man going about the work of collecting building materials for an unknown project. The old man is called Taciturn, an enigmatic name tall the way down. By definition, “taciturn” indicates something or someone communicating or pronouncing very little.⁵

Taciturn goes about his quiet daily work over fertile ground: purchasing wood and materials. “Little by little,” Serres’ narrator recounts, “it took on the look of a boat whose square walls, pierced with scuttles, could pass for those of a house.”⁶ “Ah,” the reader says, as the story begins to look more and more like the Genesis’ Noah or the epic stories of Atrahasis. Many of us know this story deep in our bones. Here comes the ark.

But Serres’ telling is not *exactly* the story we know. “Listen more closely.”⁷ The ever-reserved Taciturn offers no pronouncements or preaching of God but directs the narrator’s ear to “listen,” instead, *to the planet*. The narrator recounts, “And, indeed, in the depths of the Earth, beneath my feet, I thought I heard a muffled roaring, like an irregular rumbling, a kind of low thunder that made the ground shake like a wave.”⁸ The sound is present, barely there, shaking or quaking. The narrator thinks they hear something, but the cries are not quite decipherable. The narrator is not used to the language rumbling in this deep shake. The words break with tectonics and deep mystery. We wonder if such deep mystery is the voice of divinity itself. But that divinity is not apparent.

Taciturn continues prodding, telling stories passed down from generation about the slow rise of water, about the rising of the seas. But the old story of observation is no longer adequate; Taciturn hears something deep and new. He beckons the narrator again, “Listen to its voice. Our Earth is speaking, you feel it; it’s recounting something to us, the way your mother did,

⁵ “Taciturn” literally takes on this meaning as a noun.

⁶ Serres, 2.

⁷ Ibid, 3

⁸ Ibid.

evenings, when you weren't able to get to sleep; it's saying what it knows. What? Who is it speaking to?"⁹ Taciturn claims to have listened for seven years, attempting to discern this wayward feeling voice, this message without clarity. And while everyone is distracted with local quarrels, Taciturn says, "I don't dare speak about it to anyone since, in the village, everyone takes me for a fool, a visionary, a mystic, a bad citizen who takes no interest in political affairs."¹⁰ The politics of the day doesn't hear the rumbling, doesn't hear the new stories being told.

And this is when Taciturn turns the message out: "Nevertheless, here is my translation of the rumbling: it's announcing that the wall is cracking and is going to collapse, yes, the one on which, uneasy, we're perched."¹¹ He quietly interprets a kind of apocalyptic pronouncement. The sea will rush into their basin, the walls will crack, and everyone is in danger. At least, danger is what Taciturn thinks will happen—what he hears the voice of the earth.

His conviction about the collapse, in fear and trembling, proves correct. The walls break, the seas flood in, lives are lost, and lives are saved in the boat. The narrator is not lucky at first—they swirl in the oceanic waves and mud. Suddenly, in the midst of the chaos, Taciturn fishes the narrator out with a boathook. Landing on the familiar mountain of Ararat (indeed, Noah's very mountain), they begin again, with agriculture, biotechnology. Taciturn gets drunk on grapes and wine, as creativity and new "biotechnology," according to the narrator, emerges. "Under a new sky and in a steady breeze, this group who escaped catastrophe was born, new, from the cruel mother sea. First rebirth."¹²

⁹ Ibid., 5

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 8.

This retold story of Noah's ark removes the clear cut calling of divinity, of punishment, of an easy redemption narrative. Listening for catastrophe is fragile, tentative, textured, and discerning.¹³ The survival is chaotic, new, and just as fragile in the wake. The languages of divinity, if present, earth, and Taciturn are uncertain but attentive.

Of course, the Noah's ark myth is a popular story in an age of global warming. The story gets told as a redemption narrative, a narrative of mankind [sic] saving the natural world or animal world from the sin of humans, and a restored planet. The story often gets told with Noah as the first environmentalist, carrying on aboard his floating menagerie.

Serres performs a different kind of environmental imagination here. In retelling the Noah story as he does, Serres redirects *our* attentiveness to the mysterious sounds the planet is making, anew, asking us to attempt translation. The sounds, the rumblings, surely ring of environmental catastrophe, but interpreting our obligations and answering the strange language of the planet is an endeavor humans have widely, historically ignored. Even more, the story directs us not just to the sounds, and the sounds that we've missed as environmental change and global warming swirl around us, but also to the question of living in the wake. What do we—we who have lived without feeling or hearing the slow calls of the earth—what do we do in the wake of the catastrophe?

The literary theorist and medievalist Jeffrey Jerome Cohen likewise turns to the Noah story, recognizing the value of a multiplicity of retellings. Cohen sees a different kind of potential in these old stories, observing that, "Etymologically related to the root that also gives us *archive*, an ark is not a ship but a chest (a place for keeping records and stories safe, and a source

¹³ Thinking about eco-communication is a complex endeavor. For one example of a brilliant take on "listening" to nonhuman animals, see Australian scholar Kate Rigby's "Animal Calls" in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015: 116 – 136.

of authority).”¹⁴ Popular retellings of the Noah story and many others reduce narrative complexity to a caricature, a closed or flat narrative without saying anything helpful in the conversational present. But, for Cohen, “The Hebrew word תֵּבָה [tebah] seems to mean a box, boat or basket...Noah’s arkive is a whirlpool of heterogeneous narratives, filled with dissonance and counter-stories, a word or chest or basket preserving all kinds of forgotten tales and alterna-stories.”¹⁵ Cohen’s project goes to uncover many of the stories, medieval and otherwise, of the ark that generate new kinds of living. While people often become fixated on the catastrophic present and perceived, inevitable worst-case scenarios of global warming, Cohen argues that unfolding the heterogeneity and complexity of theological stories might offer a way through and in the midst the floods. As he argues, “My crazy idea is that if we realized better the complexity of the Noah narrative and its long history of augmentation and reinvention, we might not be so resigned to climate change, to allowing the world to drown: an ark not as container but generative spur, arkiving as story-forging and future-making.”¹⁶ Retelling old stories, like that of Noah, in new ways might forge a kind of generative creativity so needed to navigate the chaotic waters of our planet.

Like Serres, who retells Noah as Taciturn to direct our attentiveness to the cries of the earth and to think about listening and living in the wake of catastrophe, Cohen argues that a

¹⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Noah’s Archive” *In the Middle: Peace & Love in the Middle Ages*. Online: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2015/03/noahs-arkive.html> Published: March 17, 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. Cohen is particularly concerned that the ark narravive, or stories like it that invest “saving” a remnant might be stories of resignation (the flood is inevitably coming, what should we care?) or stories of exclusive salvation (only a few can fit on the ark, so we’ll gather the ark safe and make a spectacle of the dying). He hopes that the ark can become generative, creative, opening to the possibility of new ways—how might the ark stories and moves *open* into a new future.

theological story, told in anew in time and place, might offer creative and generative possibilities beyond planetary denial, resignation, or despair.

Contemporary ecologists might call these stories sources of resilience. And this present theological experiment desires such resilience to breathe throughout its pages. Indeed, this study will attempt to tell a species of old theological storytelling anew—the stories that gather themselves into the manifold theophany and epiphany traditions of Christian thought. These theologies and theopoetics may offer a way to listen to and live with and as the planet in a constructive manner. Might theology ask, with Serres' Taciturn, "Will I one day be able to decipher this call from the Earth?"¹⁷ Theology must tell stories of divinity and earth that awakens our ecological resilience.

Deciphering Calls of Climate

Hardly taciturn, a loud arkive of literature reflecting on planetary and climatological change began as a trickle in the early 20th century and now floods into global cultural imagination daily.¹⁸ From daily news reports of irregular natural disaster to apocalyptic films, we might say that—despite a very insistent and powerful minority of climate change deniers—concerns over global warming are finally entering into a kind of mainstream cultural life.¹⁹ On one hand, textually, we might attend to a growing genre of literary fiction attempting to wrestle with the "slow violence" of climate change. Writers from Margaret Atwood to Barbara Kingsolver, Nathaniel Rich and Ian McEwan all speculatively work through how something as

¹⁷ Serres, 5.

¹⁸ To track that particular genealogy, see the Bill McKibben's edited volume, *The Global Warming Reader: A Century of Writing About Climate Change*. New York: Penguin, 2011.

¹⁹ I am particularly aware, in revisiting this paragraph since I wrote it, that Scott Pruitt had his hands on the Environmental Protection Agency.

intellectually ungraspable as planetary climatological change reconstitutes human quotidian experience.²⁰ Some call this speculative fiction “cli-fi”—climate change fiction. On the other hand, we might attend to a growing popular and scholarly environmental literature attempting to account for the ever-reaching influence of human life in the intricate energy systems of this planet. These scholars all write with a passionate attention to contemporary science and catastrophic climate change, bringing the complex social and economic dimensions of our moment to cultural awareness.²¹

²⁰ There are many other kinds of cultural reflections on human experience in the anthropocene, including the fact that HBO is presently making Margaret Atwood’s environmental apocalypse *MaddAddam* into a television series. Or see, Noël Sturgeon’s *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality and the Politics of the Natural*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2009. See also the growing literature of “cli-fi,” or climate fiction, such as surveyed by the NPR piece, “So Hot Right Now: Has Climate Change Created A New Literary Genre?” <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/20/176713022/so-hot-right-now-has-climate-change-created-a-new-literary-genre>. Other texts include: Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy of *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2003; *The Year of the Flood*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2009; *MaddAddam*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2013; Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior: A Novel*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012; Daniel Krumb’s *From Here*. London: Lonely Koot, 2012; Ian McEwan’s *Solar*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2010; Kim Stanley Robinson’s *2312: A Novel*. New York: Orbit, 2012; Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013; Philippe Squarzoni’s graphic novel *Climate Changed: A Personal Journey Through the Science*. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2012; Karen Thompson Walker’s *The Age of Miracles*. New York: Random House, 2012. The list goes on of course, ever expanding even as I write, and one could include other visionaries like Ursula K. Le Guin.

²¹ See Diane Ackerman’s *The Human Age: The World Shaped By Us*. New York: WW Norton, 2014; Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014; Elizabeth Kolbert’s early book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2006, and her more recent *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2014; and a book that transgresses the hard borders between science writing and fiction, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.; Christophe Bonneuil and Jean Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016.; Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2015; Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

What seems most obvious *is* the pervasive complexity, ambiguity, or disorienting feel of this literature. In the multilayered analysis of each of these books is a sense that the planet has entered a new era at human hands, a new identity, a strange new time and feel—that “tough new planet” McKibben so aptly named. In the dust of this strange new planet, there’s a sense that we’re in a new epoch, a new era. The very idea of what “quotidian” or “ordinary” is has changed—geologically.

In the 1980s a freshwater biologist named Eugene F. Stoermer started using the term “Anthropocene” to describe human influence on the planet.²² In particular, Stoermer, invented the term to talk about anthropogenic acidification of water. Following Stoermer, the atmospheric chemist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen popularized the term as a way to signal that our geologic-historical and imaginative sense of time in the universe is now fundamentally shaped by human activity on the planet. A speciesist tilt of human activity on earth now shapes every intimate dimension of the planet’s systems—biodiversity, climate, population, food production, geological movement, erosion, fossil record, mass extinctions, etc. No part of the planet seems untouched by human influence and scientists like Stoermer and Crutzen grasped for new language to describe this reality of pervasive anthropocentrism. The name has been proposed for adoption by the International Union of Geological Sciences.²³

²² Andrew C. Revkin relates part of this history in a 2011 piece, “Confronting the ‘Anthropocene’” Online: <http://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/11/confronting-the-anthropocene/> Published May 11th, 2011.

²³ See also, James Owen, “New Earth Epoch Has Begun, Scientists Say” *National Geographic*. Online: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/04/100406-new-earth-epoch-geologic-age-anthropocene/> Published April 6th, 2010. *The New York Times Magazine* chronicles this change further with the sense that we’re past the point of no return. See, “Our Coming Climate Issue: Losing Earth” Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/> Published: July 26th, 2018. And the geological scientists also are dividing (not without controversy) the Holocene Epoch (where we still may be, supposedly). We now find ourselves in the “Meghalayan Age.” See

While the term has gained a lot of academic and professional traction, other writers aren't sure that *anthropocene* goes far enough in its description of human activity on the planet. In a piece titled "The Anthropocene Myth," Andreas Malm argues that focusing on the proliferation of human influence on the planet misses the point: it's not just that we're dealing with a particularly insidious form of speciesism that contribute to environmental degradation but, more importantly, *the way humans structure life on the planet matters*. Malm writes that, "Ours is the geological epoch not of humanity, but of capital."²⁴ The logics of global capitalism, accumulation of goods, unlimited growth, neo-imperialism, systemic economic-ecological exploitation. A number of thinkers go on to call this reality the "capitalocene."

And yet, the nomenclatures keep multiplying. Steven J. Pyne reflects on the demand for oil and natural gas in a recent piece in *Aeon* magazine. Seeing the gas flares, the fire of energy produced, he argues in his piece "The Fire Age" that the Anthropocene "might equally be called the Pyrocene. The Earth is shedding its cycle of ice ages for a fire age."²⁵ And firing in the circuits of our new context, media theorist Jussi Parikka goes even further to call our age the "Anthroscene." Parikka argues that technology is not, in fact, an extension of the "human" but in fact, "Whether or not they are perceived in terms of media, deep time resources of the earth are what make technology happen."²⁶ Minerals and elements that compose essential tools to make new technology from cables to cell phones to nuclear energy, all form not in the abstract mind of the human, but instead in the long geologic processes of the earth. Parikka ethically

"Welcome to the Meghalayan Age – a new phase in history." *BBC News*.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-44868527> Published July 18th, 2018.

²⁴ Andreas Malm, "The Anthropocene Myth" *Jacobin*. Online:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/03/anthropocene-capitalism-climate-change/> Published: March 30th, 2015.

²⁵ Steven J. Pyne, "The Fire Age" *Aeon Magazine*. Online: <http://aeon.co/magazine/science/how-our-pact-with-fire-made-us-what-we-are/>

²⁶ Jussi Parikka, *The Anthroscene*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015: 3.

speculates that we might call our epoch ‘obscene’, “when one starts to consider the unsustainable, politically dubious, and ethically suspicious practices that maintain technological culture and its corporate networks.”²⁷ Global injustices twist the geologic scenery into obscenity.

That is to say, it is not just that a singular species is defining a new epoch. We’re living in a new geologic age defined by human speciesism, with privileged humans utilizing exploitative modes of production, humans running that economy on particular kinds of elemental energy and power. The human does not act alone, and shifting our terminology prismatically shifts our understandings of the various relations constituting ecological degradation, planetary shifts. My point in raising this complication is not to “solve” the dilemma of what we should call our current era. I lift up these multiplying figures to show the disorientation of our contemporary context, and what kinds of stories might help us navigate that context. I hope to offer the textures of what that might *feel* like.

What I do want to do, however, is exuberantly point out, alongside feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway, that any figuration of earth serves as a particular kind of apparatus for interpreting the vast complexity of the problems of climate change. In her book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway points to yet two more namings, one of which expands the systemic sense of injustice of our current epoch and another which might serve as a kind of acknowledgment of context and mobilization of political possibility. The first, “Plantationocene,” an era constituted by the global economy of human-tended farms and slave labor; the second, “Chthulucene”—named for an eco-political possibility “after the diverse

²⁷ Ibid., 6. Parikka continues, “The relation of the mineral ore coltan, essential in cellphone manufacture, to the bloody civil war in Congo and the use of child labor has been discussed now for some years in cultural theory.” Parikka extends these thoughts in *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A'akuluujjusi, and many many more.”²⁸

What we learn from Haraway here is that in order to begin to think about our planetary context (given an overwhelming sense of systemic injustice) we must take into account a vast multiplicity of relational factors that extend in a variety of ecological directions. She writes, “Issues about naming...have to do with scale, rate/speed, synchronicity, and complexity...No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too.”²⁹ Any kind of theoretical naming takes into account a multiplicity of relations—even as we acknowledge the dominant models of humanity that contribute to ecological degradation. And then she continues, “Each offers unique visions of the earth that both diagnose problems *and* offer possible paths of solutions” (anthropocentrism, capitalism, etc.)³⁰ Each hinges on a certain kind of particularized philosophical conceptualization of the earth with its own possibilities and limitations. Each serves as its own kind of diagnostic vision.

In some ways, we might with Haraway think of these nomenclatures as “apparatuses” for viewing the phenomena of our world. In her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, feminist philosopher of science and

²⁸ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016: 101.

²⁹ Ibid, 99-100.

³⁰ Haraway goes so far to say that we might think of the name, “Chthulucene,” riffing off of H. P. Lovecraft’s creature, attempting to think of creativity, destruction, symbiogenesis, etc. See her 2014 lecture “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble” Located: <https://vimeo.com/97663518>. Last Accessed: May 15th, 2015.

quantum field theorist Karen Barad argues for what is being called a “new materialist” interpretation of the universe. She thinks with the entangled, irreducible relations of matter and discourse, and revises Judith Butler’s queer account of performativity in a posthumanist key to think of matter as fundamentally performative. As a framework for thinking with, about, and as matter, Barad suggests that we utilize what she also calls “apparatuses.” Barad’s sense of the characteristics of apparatuses is numerous:

- (1) apparatuses are specific material-discursive practices (they are not merely laboratory setups that embody human concepts and take measurements);
- (2) apparatuses produce differences that matter—they are boundary-making practices that are formative of matter and meaning, productive of, and part of, the phenomena produced;
- (3) apparatuses are material configurations/dynamic reconfigurings of the world;
- (4) apparatuses are themselves phenomena (constituted and dynamically reconstituted as part of the ongoing intra-activity of the world);
- (5) apparatuses have no intrinsic boundaries but are open-ended practices; and
- (6) apparatuses are not located in the world but are material configurations or reconfigurings of the world that re(con)figure spatiality and temporality as well as (the traditional notion of) dynamics (i.e., they do not exist as static structures, nor do they merely unfold or evolve in space and time).³¹

The most important point regarding these definitions is that apparatuses do not simply ‘interpret’ a world already or yet to be discovered. They are configurations and reconfigurations that are actually generative, that produce different senses of meaning and materiality. Boundaries emerge which produce differences of perspective and becoming. Those differences are “intra-active” in the flow of interpretation and mattering. Barad’s complex sense of the apparatus might offer us a sense of how to interpret the ecological nomenclatures we’ve been encountering thus far. Given Barad’s own complex reconfiguration of apparatuses as phenomena that participate in the relational difference-making of the world, I want to argue what those who study “religion and ecology” know so well. Ecological nomenclatures actually *matter* (despite the

³¹ Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007:146.

overuse of that pun). Interpretations and stories are produced by and can produce material injustices, and at the same time can cultivate praxeological hopes in setting up interpretative devices or stories differently.³² The practices and models we perform, the way we listen to the mattering of God-Earth-Human relationships actually reconfigure our sensibilities of the boundaries, identities, and differences of divinity and creatureliness.

Active interpretations *and* re-matterings of our climatological situation are therefore of fundamental importance. And religious environmentalisms and theologies hold important place among those apparatuses. Sociologist Laurel Kearns, for example, argues for a position of religious environmentalism as what she calls provocatively “pro-global warming” activism—religious advocates that believe climate change is a pervasive reality and attempt change fundamental habits of mind, value, and action. “The ‘pro-global warming’ activists want to make it a religious issue because they believe that basing any response on just the science is inadequate, for the issue is also about values.”³³ Science alone will not motivate or construct the moral arks that generate ideas through climate change. Instead, theological storytelling must bridge ways between interpretation and action, theory and ethics that help us cultivate resilience.

Kearns argues that, “in the final analysis, ‘pro-global warming’ religious ecological activism has to be about both theology and action, changing beliefs and worldviews, and patterning action that fits those changed beliefs.”³⁴ Negotiations of theology and action, apparatuses themselves, must work together for sustained ecological change and navigation. She

³² A number of theologians have rightly pointed out how much our “models” or what I would call apparatuses matter for how we imagine “God.” The classic example here, connected to ecological theology itself is Sallie McFague’s *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1987.

³³ Laurel Kearns, “Cooking the Truth: Faith, Science, the Market, and Global Warming” *EcoSpirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*. Ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007: 98.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

continues, “What is also clear is that neither one comes before the other; that is, action does not necessarily lead to changed worldviews, nor do changing one’s beliefs necessarily lead to the desired action...one must do both.”³⁵ Holistic, pervasive change and cultivation of life on a tough new planet is not necessarily a linear activity and must constantly be reexamined at all levels. As I argue above and below, theological storytelling can and must enact both so that we might move on.

In all of these nomenclatures, one feature stands out: we are no longer just talking about activism and revised frameworks that might “prevent” catastrophic climate change, we are in the wake of it as well. Whereas when nascent awareness of environmental concerns or climate change has been present, society used to speak of “climate change mitigation”—how do we prevent global warming from progressing? Instead, now, scientists, politicians, and humanists also speak of “climate change adaptation.” How do we think about resilience and politics, living and transformation, in the wake of changes that have already taken hold?³⁶ As Mark Pelling argues, “Adaptation is a social and political act; one intimately linked to contemporary, and with the possibility of reshaping future, power-relations in society.”³⁷ What motivates adaptation, what kind of adaptation, what kind of resilience, and what kind of transformation emerges in our contemporary ecological stories will be of extreme importance.

Un/earthing Listening Apparatuses

Regardless of the apparatus or conceptualization we bring to the planetary crisis, Christiana Peppard notes that, “while the effects of *Homo Sapiens* on the planet’s life support

³⁵ Ibid., 124

³⁶ See Kerry Emanuel, *What We Know about Climate Change?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

³⁷ Mark Pelling, *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation*. New York: Routledge, 2011:3.

system may not be suddenly and dramatically destructive as an asteroid strike, our collective actions nonetheless have real, long-term, planetary consequences.”³⁸ Our collective species, economic, ecological, imaginative activities all contribute to making and shaping the earth in enduring ways, and we feel the disorientation even in fundamental attempts to name those ways. The *Anthropocene* serves as placeholder for this moment, despite its difficulties as a term.

That feeling of existential shift or climatological consequence is precisely what all of the previously noted writers tune into as well: what shall we call our present moment? What material-moral-spiritual resources might we summon to help navigate an uncertain future? How is theological reflection complicit in the manipulation of the earth? What alternative role might theology play in that uncertain future? What apparatuses do we utilize to name our relations, even as we acknowledge interpretive limitations and complexities? How do we do theology with, or for, or in the Anthropocene?

Most surely, one could write a rich analysis of the role of religion or theology in the thought of all the non-theological writers invoked above, especially in their narrative fiction. My desire here, however, is to track a specific theological concept, the theological apparatus of “earth,” through the genealogy of contemporary ecotheology. We find ourselves, or so this dissertation will claim, in need of theological reflection that addresses our contemporary context of climate change and urges moral responsibility for overturning the systemic injustices that constituted and legitimated scapegoating of the earth—by anthropocentrism, sexism, imperialism, racism, heterosexism...(and the litany goes on). We find ourselves in need of theological reflection that can motivate moral pleasure and reimagine the place of human life on

³⁸ Christiana Z. Peppard, “Theology and Climate Change” *NTR*, Vol 26:2, March 2014: p. 101. Peppard also notes that Crutzen has been, since the 1990s, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The anthropocene, if not explicitly a theological concept, at least connects sociologically to religion-science conversations.

earth instead of leaving us to collapse out of environmental despair. We find ourselves in need of theological reflection that takes our fragility and resilience seriously. This pale blue dot of a planet spins on, shudders, breaks apart, glaciates, burns, and churns deep metals in its core. Sometimes a story glimpses the dynamism of this planetary flesh; sometimes such a story is a story of divinity.

Given our new context in the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, the disorienting unnameable epoch to which human beings find themselves listening, this chapter attempts to “hear to speech”³⁹ a geo-genealogy in modern ecotheological reflection—the figuration of the planet earth itself as a theological concept. Like the contemporary ecological nomenclatures, each theologian attempts a theological concept of the earth that highlights particular values, injustices, and theological implications of how human beings should be located within that imaginative conceptualization. The frame that shapes my argument holds that the relationship of divinity and “Earth” or “the planet” is just as constructed a concept as is “nature,” relying on different kinds of sources and emphases; so what theologians mean by “earth” matters theologically and politically. The God-Human-Earth relationship is an apparatus configured and reconfigured for interpreting particular dimensions of ecological harm as well as for responding to that harm in particular ways.

Rebecca Neale Gould and Laurel Kearns note that, “While what we now call ‘eco-theology did not begin to develop until the 1970s, both religious and ‘spiritual-but-not-religious concern for the natural world continued to develop from the mid-19th century forward.”⁴⁰ Even

³⁹ Nelle Morton, classic words from her essay, “Beloved Image,” *The Journey is Home*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Neale Gould and Laurel Kearns, “Ecology and Religious Environmentalism in the United States” in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion and America*. Online: <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore->

prior to the emergence of a coalesced field of “religion and ecology” or “ecothology,” theologians and scholars of religion have reflected on ecology as playing a vital role in shaping and being shaped by theological and philosophical stories. That field turned into what is a robust collection of scholarship known as ecological theology or “religion and ecology.”⁴¹ In the rest of this chapter, then, I track the emergence of a vital apparatus—the earth as a theological subject. I think about different configurations of this apparatus in, for example: 1) early ecotheologies concerned with care of the earth, 2) eco-liberationist critiques of the classist and racist neglect of the earth and the poor, 3) ecofeminist and ecowomanist critiques of binary thought, and 4) recent theological attention to deconstructive multiplicity and what I’m going to call poststructural geophilosophy.

Each of these figurations, I argue, poses a particular kind of concept of the earth—each sees certain kinds of problems and solutions and obscures other kinds of problems and other kinds of solutions. Amidst the multiplicity of theology, each is needed, in its own way, though I will argue for the importance of the last option and will go on to construct what I’m calling a “theopoetics of the earth,” an “eartheology,” or an earthy, “theophanic conviviality” in the space of the chapters to follow.

Earth: The Rumbblings of a Theological Concept

In their historical genealogy of the field, *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*, Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons argue that, “The texts of theologians seek to create a

[9780199340378-e-445](#) Also see Panu Pikhala’s more in depth account, *Early Ecotheology and Joseph Sittler*. Zurich: Lit Verlag GmbH & Co. KG Wien, 2017.

⁴¹ For introductions, for example, see: John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker. *Ecology and Religion*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014. Or, more recently, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Nature: The Elements*. Ed. Whitney A. Bauman and Laura Hobgood. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

cultural space...Ecotheologians seek transformation in the way human societies function in relation to the rest of the natural world.”⁴² Ecotheologians vary, of course, in precisely how they attempt to construct transformative thought and praxis. And much of how they do so is dependent upon how they construct the “natural world” and what milieu they respond to in the first place.

Joseph Sittler (1904-1987) is often named as one of the early instigators of “Christian ecotheology.”⁴³ A Lutheran theologian from Ohio, he referred to his work as “constructive theology” and produced some of the first, provocative, and insightful reflections on ecology and theology.⁴⁴ His writing is compelling, poetic, often dotted with foresight into the next movements in theological education.

In 1954, almost a decade before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* brought the environmental movement to the American consciousness, Sittler wrote an incredible piece of theological “ponderings” where he invited deliberation and conversation on the “relation of Christian faith

⁴² Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons. *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010: xi.

⁴³ His works are quite often occasional, sermonic, reflective of particular kinds of contextual locations. And he refers to himself as a “constructive theologian,” a term we often reserve for contemporary theologians. See the Joseph Sittler Archives, online, at <http://www.josephsittler.org/>. For his other works see, *The Care of the Earth*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004; *Gravity and Grace: Reflections and Provocations*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005; *The Ecology of Faith: The New Situation of Preaching*. Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1961; *The Structure of Christian Ethics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

⁴⁴ He writes, “I am what is called a constructive theologian: it is my job to probe at the edges of things as responsibly as I can.” The statement is one of many short sketches of Sittler’s writing collected over the years. Later published as *Grace Notes and Other Fragments*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1981. It is likely that Sittler picked up the term in the milieu of Chicago School Liberalism in the mid-20th century. See Jason A Wyman, Jr.’s genealogy of the term and the work of constructive theology in *Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017. Unfortunately, Wyman’s text does not reflect on Sittler explicitly.

and nature.”⁴⁵ Instead of offering an already-complete and polished systematic theology, Sittler surmises: “All systematic constructions have got to be preceded in my opinion by exposure to the creative chaos, the promising apprehension of emergent meaning...”⁴⁶ The piece is almost a prophetic foretaste of the theological possibility that was about to burst open in reflection upon ecological issues.

In that piece, “A Theology for Earth,” he notes a “deepening uneasiness about that tendency in biblical theology, generally known as neo-orthodoxy, whereby the promises, imperatives, and dynamics of the Gospel are declared in sharp and calculated disengagement from the stuff of earthly life.”⁴⁷ There is in contemporary theology, he notes, an “almost proud repudiation of the earth.”⁴⁸ The piece serves to critique a pervasive tendency of dominant 20th century neoorthodox theology to emphasize the “inbreaking” of the revelation of God into human life. For Sittler, this feature of neoorthodoxy began to (consciously or unconsciously) cultivate a sense of disregard for earthly life and bodied existence. The piece then, served as an invitation, a letter to popular trends, an inquiry into the possible negative side effects of mainstream religious reflection.

“A Theology for Earth” attempts to offer a constructive possibility for how humanity can relate to “nature.” Sittler sets up this possibility between two paths for construing the human-nature relationship. On one hand, Sittler writes, “nature can be subsumed under man.”⁴⁹ We might consider this the “anthropocentric” option of human superiority. Materially and

⁴⁵ Joseph Sittler. “A Theology for Earth.” In *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*. Ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 2000:20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

symbolically, nature serves the ends of human kind. “Materially, that is, she [nature, sic] is reduced to a resource for his needs; spiritually she is envisioned as only an unreplying theater for his proud and pathetic life.”⁵⁰ The earth is a plunderable object, to be used for exclusively human goods. The earth serves as the unimportant backdrop for human workings, politics, actions, goals, hopes, loves. And the emotional comportment of that life gets projected symbolically and culturally onto the rest of the natural world. “Her life, infinite in richness and variety is made a symbolic companion of man’s life; and all the moods and shadows, the pride and the pathos, the ambiguity and the sudden delight of man’s life is read in her mobile face.”⁵¹ Rather than regarding ecological life in its own light, anthropocentric projections corrupt the symbolic and cultural workings of human society, culture, and individuality.

On the other hand, Sittler argues, human beings can give up any semblance of uniqueness for the sake of nature. “Man [sic] is subsumed under nature...man abdicates—and celebrates his shameful abdication by perverse delight in that which overcomes him.”⁵² Such an action completely gives human life over to the whims and “lusts” that overcome human being. They simply go with the ecological flow, as it were.

In between these two options, Sittler stakes out a third way. He argues that, “neither one does justice either to the amplitude and glory of man’s spirit or to the felt meaningfulness of the natural world.”⁵³ Sittler’s constructive solution is to turn to Christian theological tradition and scriptural articulations of creation, where he finds “a holy naturalism, a matrix of grace.”⁵⁴ He argues that, “Man [sic] and nature live out their distinct but related lives in a complex that recalls

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

the divine intention as that intention is symbolically related in the first page of the Bible. Man is placed, you will recall, in the garden of earth. The garden he is to tend as God's other creation—not to use as a godless warehouse or to rape as a tyrant.”⁵⁵ Sittler pulls at the language of stewardship here, arguing for humanity's particular place *and* responsibility in the garden of Earth.

Sittler's early call for a “theology of earth” is one voice among a small, early number.⁵⁶ Thomas Berry, for instance, called himself a “geologist” rather than a theologian. He embarked as a fresh explorer upon a new cosmology. But Sittler's call is of specific interest in that his writing begins to refigure the role of theology itself as a kind of work to and for the earth within the larger sway of a Christian doctrine of creation. He will later, in a 1961 speech given to the World Council of Churches in New Delhi, India, a more clarion ecotheological call to the whole of the ecumenical Christian enterprise.

“Called to Unity” became Sittler's rallying cry. He begins the speech with Colossians 1:15-20, where the author argues that “all things,” *ta panta*, were created in Christ—a cosmic Christological interpretation of Creation. Arguing against a certain reduction of the Gospel into flat morals concerned with salvation, Sittler argues that this passage redirects Christian thought to the larger cosmos. “Is it again possible,” Sittler asks, “to fashion a theology catholic enough to affirm redemption's force enfolding nature, as we have affirmed redemption's force unfolding history?”⁵⁷ In the spirit of this voice in Colossians, Sittler asks if soteriology hasn't become so

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-9.

⁵⁶ I am especially indebted to Panu Pihkala's study for uncovering a number of ecological voices in the mid-20th century.

⁵⁷ Joseph Sittler, “Called to Unity” in *Evocations of Grace: Writings on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*. Edited by Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Baken. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000: 182.

narrow as to close human listening to the environmental harms done to, in his view, locales in nature.

It is important to remember at this point is that Sittler is writing at the genesis of the modern American, and indeed global, environmental movement.⁵⁸ Climate science has not yet popularized—or even established—an understanding of global warming, and so Sittler is largely responding to the growing consciousness of the effects of pollution on one hand and the threat of nuclear planetary destruction on the other. His imagination is still (relatively) rooted in local harms rather than planetary ones. Still, the cosmic language of his theology keeps pulling his language out into the planetary. Christian theology, he argues, has forgotten that hurt flows out into creation, and that theology should attend to that neglect. Salvation is not simply a human reality. If theology sees harm in creation, it should widen its scope: “When atoms are disposable to the ultimate hurt then the very atoms must be reclaimed for God and his [sic] will.”⁵⁹ Pain reaches all the way down to an atomic level. Sittler is explicitly riffing off of the threat of nuclear destruction here, but a kind of theology attuned to the atomic is not so far from attuning to the geologic shifts of the Anthropocene or the atmospheric shifts of global warming.

Sittler’s impassioned plea is for theology to listen to ecological voices—in science and in poetry. He urges that theology look outside of its own Christian theological fideistic bubbles and expand into the mysterious new ways of knowing. He writes, “There are perceptive men in the world who glimpse this, even outside the Christian confession, and in the dark language of nature’s pathos as it groans and travails in pain they set it forth.”⁶⁰ Theology must attune into the

⁵⁸ At the same time, it is important to note that the American agrarian and conservation movements had been going strong for a while. This chapter is choosing to hone in on a particular activist, ecotheological, and environmentalist strand.

⁵⁹ Sittler, 184.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

deep groans and language of the earth. We might hear Sittler arguing that we listen to the odd mystics like Serres' Taciturn as we begin to feel our way in new ecological contexts. We might listen especially because for Sittler this material creation is the place of incarnation of divinity. "This radioactive earth, so fecund and so fragile, is [God's] creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother in Christ's light."⁶¹ "Earth" is construed in the theological matrix of creation, resilient and creative, yet threatened and endangered. And while Sittler does not fully reflect on the implications on that construal of creation, we might infer that Divinity becomes incarnate within the matrix of that fecundity and fragility. And theology itself is therefore fecund and fragile in that matrix reflecting on creation as well. Theology emerges as deconstructive of views that imperil creation and constructive of new expansive cosmological visions of care, salvation, and earthly grace.

Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor: Intersectional Earth

In a number of ways, Sittler's theology anticipates the emergence of the field of ecotheology writ large. In 1967, for instance, the medieval historian Lynn White, Jr., will write his (still) vital and controversial analysis on religion and environmentalism. In "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" (a title that is often mistitled as "ecological crisis"), White attempts to tease out the underlying patterns of thinking or *ecologic* that licenses contemporary disregard of the planet. The thesis only filled a couple of pages in the magazine *Science*, but White's conclusion is often the origin for the study of religion and ecology.

⁶¹ Ibid., 187.

White argued that creatures modify contexts and that human beings are no different. “Ever since man [sic] became a numerous species he has affected his environment notably.”⁶² We might find here an early logic similar to that of the Anthropocene—the modification of contexts magnified to a planetary scale. White, however, wanted to dig deeply into the Western stories told about nonhuman life. The story he uncovered? None other than the narratives of creation in Genesis. White recounts, “Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit or rule: no item in physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes.”⁶³ White sees the story of creation one utterly tilted towards anthropological value. While “natural” elements and creatures all make appearances, human being is the pinnacle of creation. Humans maintain that value because of a certain theological anthropology involved. He continues, “And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image.”⁶⁴ Even while God creates humankind from the dust of the earth, humans also maintain a status *above, unique, and in power over* the rest of the created earth. Everything exists to serve human beings.

White goes on to argue, as the most memorable part of his classic thesis, that when the emergence of medieval agricultural technologies that could radically transform landscape in ways never before seen met with this theological anthropology of a human-centered *imago Dei*, the world became imperiled. “Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most

⁶² Lynn White, Jr. “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis” *Science*. New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967), p. 1203. White’s scholarship on this topic emerged from working on much larger issues of medieval context and technology in a book five years earlier. See his *Medieval Technology and Social Change*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962.

⁶³ White, “Historical,” 1205.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”⁶⁵ Anthropocentrism of value and attitude shaped, in White’s mind, the Western world. Dominion meant domination.

White’s thesis set off a firestorm of agreement and praise, contempt and criticism, and influences the ecotheological field to this day.⁶⁶ The critique haunts the field. Sadly, oft forgotten is White’s conclusion that the religious problem involved in Christian anthropology needed a religious course-corrective in the guise of ecologically-attuned religious figures like Saint Francis of Assisi. The son of a Christian ethics professor, White viewed religion as integral to historical and ecological analysis.⁶⁷ I shall return to that question of a revised theological remedy and White’s salient new animist concept of the “democracy of all creatures” in Chapter 3. But uneasy scholars criticized everything from White’s sense of history, his focus on Western culture, his theological intuition, and biblical scholarship.⁶⁸ Others have critiqued religious environmental scholarship for elevating “The Historical Roots” well beyond appropriate influence. And others have pointed out White’s sense of ecological understanding exceeds that singular piece. Still, it’s hard to deny that the anthropocentrism White names is

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ One of the accountings of the diverse reception of Sittler’s article is Willis Jenkins, “After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems” *Journal of Religious Ethics*. June 2009: 283 – 309.

⁶⁷ He also held a degree from Union Theological Seminary. Matthew Riley’s re-examination of White’s scholarship is a welcome contribution to the field. See, for example, “A Spiritual Democracy of All Creatures: Ecotheology and the Animals of Lynn White, Jr.” in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

⁶⁸ Richard Bauckham issues most of these criticisms in his *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011. Bauckham chooses to place much of the blame on the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution instead of the biblical topos of stewardship. I think he overstates his case. For other helpful critiques and responses see *Religion and Ecological Crisis: The “Lynn White Thesis” at Fifty*. Eds. Todd LeVasseur and Anna Peterson. New York: Routledge, 2016.

present in certain forms of Western Christianity, and hard to deny that his thesis provoked a lot of valuable, necessary conversation and scholarship.

The historical unfolding of White's critique of anthropocentrism in the study of religion and ecology mirrors the contemporary unfolding of apparatuses that name the Anthropocene. In the 1970s, 80s and 90s liberation, ecofeminist and womanist theologians engaged White's critique and began to point out the interlocking logics of anthropocentrism with male power, sexism, masculinity, and racist oppression. Liberationists such as Brazilian theologians Ivone Gebara and Leonardo Boff began to point towards the larger intersections of this logic of scapegoating the earth. Listening to the poor, victimized, and marginalized, these theologians began uncovering the voice of the earth as utterly linked with the voice of the oppressed. In his *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff argues for an integrated social ecological critique. In trying to articulate a theology of earth, Boff notes that, "human beings are not so much beings on Earth as beings of Earth."⁶⁹ Human creatures find themselves an expression of a unique eco-social matrix, innovative expressions of creativity and cosmogenesis. And yet, systems of power overlay this expression. He argues, "The very same logic of the prevailing system of accumulation and social organization that leads to the exploitation of workers also leads to the pillaging of whole nations and ultimately to the plundering of nature."⁷⁰ The logic of instrumentalization and domination is not simply a generic human logic, but a logic that shapes Empire, colonialization and the scapegoating of the poor for the production of goods in the global north.

⁶⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*. Trans. Phillip Berryman. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997: 321.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 325.

Boff argues that the only answer, theologically, is a re-attuned sense of liberation and justice that hears the mystery of the earth, the liberation of the poor, and the fullness of an ecological democracy—and hears them together. He writes, “Such justice entails more than social justice. It entails a new covenant between human beings and other beings, a new gentleness toward what is created, and the fashioning of an ethic and mystique of kinship with the entire cosmic community. The Earth is also crying out under the predatory and lethal machinery of our model of society and development.” We must, he concludes, hear these “interconnected cries.”⁷¹

How do we hear those cries and attend to them? Leonardo Boff’s argument is for a radical relationalism, where, “We suggest the paradigm of the connectedness of all with all, which allows for the emergence of a religion, convergence in religious diversity, and will achieve peace between humans and Earth.”⁷² Religious innovation and newness begins to develop as a collaborative project of planetary democracy and peace. Boff’s language inform the new calls for an “integral ecology” that attends that very same “cry of the earth, cry of the poor” coming from the Vatican in Pope Francis’ second encyclical, *Laudato si’*.

Other liberation theologians, like James Cone, echo Boff’s logic in a specific North American context. James Cone, in his 2000 “Whose Earth is it Anyway?” sees binary logic working similarly. His opening paragraph is worth quoting at length here:

⁷¹ Ivone Gebara calls for a similar listening – to the cries and the joyful canticles of creativity. See her *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Trans. David Molineaux. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999. Also see my treatment of her sense of canticle multiplicity in “Doxological Diversities and Canticle Multiplicities: The Trinitarian Anthropologies of David H. Kelsey and Ivone Gebara” in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*. Ed. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

⁷² Boff., 327.

The logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and Apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white world supremacy. People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological—whether they know it or not. People who struggle against environmental degradation but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists—whether they acknowledge it or not. The fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms.⁷³

In this singular piece, Cone connects the domination logics of white supremacy with the logics of earthly domination and notes that ecological theology must take environmental racism into account even as black liberation theology must take the earth into account. He reflects on the scapegoating of animals and the dehumanization of people of color. And he notes that black feminist and womanist theologians and ethicists like Delores Williams, had already begun to connect these integral logics.

Delores Williams, for instance, in her 1994 piece, “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies” connects white theology with the oppression and wasting of black women’s bodies in the historical violence of surrogacy. She connects the “defilement of earth’s body, and the defilement of black women’s bodies.”⁷⁴ White masculine logics of power and systemic oppression sanctioned the instrumental use of nature to a violating degree. The bodies of black women and the body of the earth suffered rape, oppression, and inhumanities beyond measure.

⁷³ James H. Cone, “Whose Earth is it Anyway?” in *Earth Habitat: Eco-injustice and the Church’s Response*. Ed., Dieter Hessel and Larry L. Rasmussen. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001: 23-32.

⁷⁴ Delores S. Williams. “Sin, Nature, and Black Women’s Bodies” in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*. Ed. Carol J. Adams. New York: Continuum, 1993: 24 - 29.

Other ecowomanist theologians like Karen Baker-Fletcher and Melanie Harris have expanded her claims and constructed new interpretations.⁷⁵

Around the same time, in her 1993 Maldeva Lectures, theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson develops this critique of anthropocentrism into a larger critique and more particular theology of the earth. Arguing against the violence she calls “ecocide,” Johnson writes that “the exploitation of the earth, which has reached crisis proportions in our day, is intimately linked to the marginalization of women, and that both of these predicaments are intrinsically related to forgetting the Creator Spirit who pervades the world in the dance of life.”⁷⁶ Riffing on contemporary ecofeminism, Johnson articulates a tripartite exclusive logic that sanctions multiple strands of misogyny and anti-ecological life. Rather than a generic anthropocentric value, Johnson calls this logic “hierarchical dualism.”⁷⁷

Hierarchical dualism, in her description, is “a pattern of thought and action that (1) divides reality into two separate and opposing spheres, and (2) assigns a higher value to one of

⁷⁵ While the manifold writings of Alice Walker, Chickwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, and Clenora Hudson-Weems often carry ecological themes, in theology see: Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998.; and Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017. We could also include in this list Emilie M. Townes important womanist work on public health, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998. For a genealogy of womanist thought see, *The Womanist Reader*. Ed. Layli Phillips. New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth A. Johnson. *Woman, Earth, and Creator Spirit*. New York: Paulist Press, 1993:

⁷⁷ Johnson is, of course, not alone in making this sort of critique. Johnson continues her early work in the later *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. More recently, she has turned to soteriology and the cross for thinking about the doctrine of creation more generally. See her *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. Critiques of modern binary thinking and hierarchical dualisms abound. For an updated queer critique that works with Val Plumwood’s also important scholarship, see Greta Gaard’s “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” *Hypatia*. Vol. 1:1, 1997: 137.

them.”⁷⁸ Johnson states in simple terms the complex logic that functions in the flesh to wield systemic power in a misogynistic society. Biological sex and gender is divided into male versus female, masculine versus feminine, rational versus passionate, transcendent versus earthly in this logic. Hierarchical dualism works system-wide to make sure that the first characteristics in that list maintain hegemonic power. Indeed, as Johnson continues, “Hierarchical dualism delivers a two-tiered vision of reality that privileges the elite half of a pair and subordinates the other, which is thought to have little or no intrinsic value of its own but exists only to be of use to the higher.”⁷⁹ Similar to White’s concerns about anthropocentrism, Johnson sees the effects of this logic as a kind of utilitarian abuse. People and earthly matters are rendered to be things and only worthwhile insofar as they are useful for maintaining and supporting existing power structures. The logic upholds the hierarchical “tree,” as Johnson calls it, of masculine power.

This tree influences theology, as well, particularly in how that logic forms a doctrine of God. Johnson writes, “Our eyes have been blinded to the sacredness of the earth, which is linked to the exclusion of women from the sphere of the sacred, which is tied to focus on a monarchical, patriarchal idea of God and a consequent forgetting of the Creator Spirit, the Lifegiver who is intimately related to the earth.”⁸⁰ Certain notions of a monarchical divinity, superior to earthly creation, enshrine patriarchal power. Instead, a kind of new “circle of mutuality” with Divinity and earth should be sought.⁸¹ For Johnson, the panentheistic perichoresis of the Creator Spirit enlivening and participating in all of creation is a closer potential for corrective. Rather than kingship, “kinship” and environmental justice should be sought. Johnson’s critique of limiting

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

dualisms, alongside her constructive turn to kinship, opens up the possibility of seeing kin upon kin, a manifold creation beyond dominating and dualistic focus.

The Manifold Voices of Creation

Arguments for creaturely kinship and mutuality abound in the 1990s. And they begin to spiral with poetic intrigue and interest. Like Johnson, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether's work engages a long history of Roman Catholic social teaching. But Ruether departs from doctrinal conformity, and she will ask in her book, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, "Are Gaia, the living and sacred earth, and God, the monotheistic deity of the biblical traditions, on speaking terms with each other?"⁸² The manifold voices of Gaia as living earth and monotheistic Divinity abound. The concept of "Gaia" reads as everything from immanent feminine Divinity to the complex interdependent systems of the planet—biological, atmospheric, and geological. Like the writers above, Ruether locates the violation of the planet in the structures of intersectional social injustice that pervade "Western" society. She engages in "earth healing" attention to Gaian systems a resilient model that takes seriously the reality of ecological crises. While Ruether's project seeks a kind of manifold beyond anthropocentric binaries, she still distances herself however from radically immanent divinity. And her sense of Gaian spirituality and Divine earth healing of course do not take the last two decades of the Anthropocene and more permanent changes in global warming into account.⁸³

⁸² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1994: 1.

⁸³ My own initial concern is that, quite often, popular Gaian spiritualities vary in taking into account deep and radical planetary changes, and just as often don't take into account atmospheric composition or change or extra-planetary induced change. The earth as a living system is often viewed in opposition to the rest of the ecology of the cosmos. Still, many new perspectives on the classical Gaia theory prove fruitful. James Lovelock is constantly revising his original thesis

Gaian spiritualities might just be one species of the kind of theology I'm advocating here: theologies that subvert hierarchicalizations of power, pursue intersectional forms of justice, and feel their way towards healing or reciprocity.⁸⁴ We might with theologian Laurel Schneider call the violent logics critiqued a "logic of the One," where the singularity and exclusivity of a patriarchal deity excludes the messy multiplicity of creation.⁸⁵ The majority of these ecofeminist and liberation theologies of the earth critique a monologic not just of patriarchal dualism but of a patriarchal "one versus many" that sanctions unlimited use of finite ecological resources and sanctifies the sacrifices of poor people and people of color. These logics prop up the Global North's use of ecological resources, and, we might again affirm, structure the material realities of the Anthropocene as it unfolds today.⁸⁶ These theologies critique old assumptions about the earth, and in their patient deconstructive exposing of logics of domination add a constructive theo-ethical element of kinship to the discussions. They attempt to gesture toward not just a dialogical solution or question of mutuality, but a question of how to think a theology of earth in its manifold.

Still, dualisms linger with assumptions about essentialisms and substances that don't adequately articulate the messy diversity of life. Earth is not just one thing, nature, or essence.

to the new context. Also see: Catherine Keller's chapter, "Broken Touch: Ecology of the Im/possible" in *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015: 266; Bruno Latour. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2017.; and Ann Primavesi, *Gaia and Climate Change: A Theology of Gift Events*. New York: Routledge Press, 2009.

⁸⁴ Another important work in this regard is Michael S. Northcott *A Political Theology of Climate Change*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2013.

⁸⁵ Laurel C. Schneider. *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

⁸⁶ And we should remark the way that these logics now interact with growing political economies in China. See, for example, *Resigned Activism: Living with Pollution in Rural China*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

It is, to quote Boff again, a diverse cosmogenesis. So we might ask a deeper questions of that manifold cosmos. The creativity of those questions and answers should be the vocation of scholars in the Anthropocene. Given critiques of dualistic, racist, sexist (and heterosexist), and imperialistic logic that forms human attitudes toward the earth, how do we begin to construct an ecotheology that listens to these manifold voices as well as beings; that thereby articulates a positive vision for what listening and resilient, transformed, multiplicitous kinship look like in the wake of the aftereffects of this logic? Given the aftereffects that curl into the manifold of the earth, how do we reckon an ecotheological vision when the histories of violence and planetary scars remain?

Schneider, like Cohen, argues for the power of retold or renegotiated theological stories. We return to old stories, repeated, though with difference to think about metaphysics and ethics in the present. “Stories,” Schneider argues, “—the ones that get loose, build and unbuild worlds—are the real concern of theology precisely because they express the motility of creation.”⁸⁷ Theology might be considered a form of storytelling that renegotiates the present, even as it deploys old words, world, or systems that have lost original meanings (as if we could ever get at those original meanings purely, anyway). We might unbuild the worlds of theological dominative logics of earth and attempt to build something more “fecund and fragile,” as Sittler says, in its wake. What kinds of constructive cries or praises or singing might we contribute?

How do we construct a theology of the earth that takes into account environmental injustice, the earthly manifold, and the radical decenterings of violent logic or deconstructive attitudes that upend our expectations what earth in its multitude and variety is? In her article, “Talking Dirty: Ground is Not Foundation,” Catherine Keller gestures towards one possibility.

⁸⁷ Schneider, 125.

“[L]et the earth itself be the ground,” she argues; “let every grounding metaphor acknowledge its place, its earth, and its planetary context. Let it disclose its clay feet.”⁸⁸ In some sense, our material and manifold selves must acknowledge the multiplicity of the apparatuses and locales that bring them to be. Like Haraway’s, Keller’s work acknowledges the need for a relational multiplicity that can begin to form ecopolitical affiliations across lines of difference. If the dominological attitudes like those noted above are just the tip of the melting iceberg (and this writer bets they are), then we need our theology to listen to its own material formation and listen to the cries of the material, even elemental, collective of others.

Keller calls this creative and imperiled matrix a “genesis collective,” that reminds us that we’re never isolated, unchanging subjects with eternal truths. “Earth itself does the dirty work of destabilization. The material ground is the effect of unimaginable intensities of flow and shift.” In some ways, earth calls to us to acknowledge the theological power of our contexts and reform our stories to take that context into account. A theology of the earth or of ecojustice is not simply speaking *about* earth; a theology of earth is a poesis of the manifold relations that make up earth itself. Our theology is composed from the messy soil and atmosphere, body and breath, of genesis, just as are we.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Catherine Keller, “Talking Dirty: Ground is Not Foundation.” *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth*. Ed. Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller. New York: Fordham Press, 2007: 65.

⁸⁹ My approach here, I should note, serves as a creative contrast to the “Universe Story” or “journey of the universe” popularized by Thomas Berry, John Grim, Mary Evelyn-Tucker, and others. My fear is that the “universe story” sometimes sacrifices or ignores the immense, important diversity of cultural hermeneutics in creating planetary understanding, and often sacrifices the tragic for the sake of beautiful awe in the universe. I do stand, however, in “planetary solidarity” with the makers of the universe story approach. For more on “planetary solidarity” in earth-centric approaches see Heather Eaton’s “An Earth-Centric Theological Framing for Planetary Solidarity” in *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Eds. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017:19-44.

Speculative Fabulation and Tuning in to a Theopoetics of the Earth

I have set up, the narrative I have in order to illumine the deconstructive and constructive elements of ecotheology. Theology can be read as a kind of poiesis, a making or constructing, a feature of earthy creativity itself that frames, interprets, enacts, and lures responses to that very earth as well. Our new context demands an uncovering of the messiness of theology. Theology, as such, is culpable of all kinds of earthly violence alongside all manner earthly peace. And contemporary theologies of the earth, as theo-logics, attempt to uncover the logical anthropocentrism, androcentrism, environmental racism, and speciesism that structure oppression. But the constructive need for a kind of generative theopoetics of the earth—new ways of being and imagining earth are needed, too. What must we do to “talk dirty” about our planetary locale in the Anthropocene?

For the endeavor of telling theological stories about the earth differently, I return to Haraway. Talking about a fragile and fecund earth in attentive ways, re-establishing lines of kinship for collective materiality, beauty, and politics, requires a different kind of theology. Haraway suggests that what is needed to talk anew when we know not how is “speculative fabulation.” Haraway desires to “stay with the trouble” of our current predicament. “Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles.”⁹⁰ We require unexpected alliances, old stories told in new ways, new stories told in old ways, all for the sake of creating vital filiations and affectations. We want to recompose ways to hear kinship, Johnson’s circles of mutuality, and cries of the earth alongside cries of the poor, earthbound mourning as well as earthbound joy

⁹⁰ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 4.

in the wake of loss. Our theologies must enact instead a theo-poetics of becoming-with, a theo-poetics of the earth.

Schneider calls it theological storytelling, and for Haraway it is speculative fabulation (also called “SF”) that allows one to explore aspirational stories—stories that speculate about our planetary relations in ways that create messy, earthy connections of responsibility. Speculative fabulation in its making fundamentally attempts to enact both the theory and the ethics required to think about the planet. Haraway enacts her own speculative fabulation in *Staying with the Trouble*. Her closing chapter fabulates a fictional story, of what would happen if people practiced attention and creative counter-memory of specific creatures extinct or going extinct. In her telling, multiple generations of humans tell stories, passed down generation after generation about scientific and cultural interaction with monarch butterflies. They do so to and fabulate symbiotic relationships with the butterfly. As they do so, they begin to see how butterfly ecologies transgress human political boundaries across North America and evoke a different sense of planetary life. Paying attention to these creatures—telling stories of them—for Haraway, evokes lament, care, and wonder.

Haraway’s concern is to tell decolonial feminist stories that work through the double bind in our contemporary moment that either a utopic technological fix is coming (hauntingly sounding of divine intervention or human dominion) or that the end is nigh, and nothing human beings can do is worthwhile. Her stories attempt to ally themselves, talk dirty, and create new politics that neither submit to naïve hope nor capitulate to overwhelming despair at our sordid history or context. They utilize memory as well as creativity to make a way out of none.

And that’s what this dissertation attempts as well, a speculative fabulation that listens to and talks dirty about divinity and earth for the sake of resilience and political transformation.

How might a theopoetics of the earth affiliate our attention with our planetary contexts, attentive to the injustices of the past? If a theopoetics of the earth is to be a kind of ecotheological storytelling or ecotheo-speculative fabulation, that theopoetics must redirect our planetary attention to the manifold flows of energy going into the Anthropocene.

The following chapters propose my speculative arkive, sailing close to the winds ecological transformation. Firstly, I turn to the annals of theological history: the tradition of in biblical texts and Christian theology continuously reimagined divinity and reenergized attention to materiality, justice, and aesthetics. As manifestations of divinity in place, the mysterious appearance of divinity relocates a call for justice in a new and enlivened sense of creation. Biblical theophanies, as we shall see, entail such calls, often occurring in the most unexpected of places and calling to the most unexpected of politics. And the concept of theophany in the writings of the 9th century Irish mystic John Scottus Eriugena will serve as a vital guide for a speculative fabulation of creating an affinity of divinity and earth that takes critiques of dualism and gestures of multiplicity seriously. Each and every creature is, for Eriugena, a theophany as divine energy flowing as the self-making of God. Indeed, Eriugena's theophanic understanding of creation led to his being declared a heretic and pantheist by later authorities. The divine energies Eriugena plays with reveal creation to be the strange and beautiful elusiveness of a God whose relation to creation may serve to elude easy dominological attitudes. A constructive reflection on Eriugena's pantheism may inform a creative understanding of creaturely resilience in relationship to Divinity. My goal here, is not to reclaim Eriugena's concept of theophany in its original context, but to take the poetics of his thought into a new context, and repeat them with a difference.

Chapter Three unfolds this speculative fabulation of theophany as it might relate to a contemporary perspective on materiality. New materialisms and animisms are reforming contemporary understandings of earth's materiality. Matter, escaping classical notions of "passivity" in relationship to human or Divine activity, is being rethought in its complex depth. In thinking with those new materialisms and new animisms, a newly speculative concept of theophany might begin to further articulate and illuminate the reciprocal agencies of divinity and animated matter as it unfolds. Attentiveness to new materialities is of vital importance as the very geological matter of our planet shifts and reshapes. Theophany might illumine better ways of letting theology "talk dirty."

As a concept, theophany carries aesthetic dimensions. Theophanic manifestations of divinity illumine relations, redirect affective attentions, complicatedly incarnate in the ravaged materiality of the world. Chapter Four turns to the theological aesthetics of this speculative fabulative concept and asks what it means to consider a theological notion of beauty on a planet where so much has been destroyed, damaged, lost, made extinct. Theophany might urge a different sense of sight, where the beautiful and the tragic are complicatedly illumined together, acknowledged together, and inform a different sense of ecopolitics.

Finally, the work of this fabulation turns to the politics of the Anthropocene itself and the commons that make up the planet. Even as we live on a tough, new planet, that planet is a both a common and ravaged ground. What kind of planetary politics might theophany illumine? I argue that a theophanic commons and theophanic conviviality might emerge. Latent in the losses, new growth takes shape simultaneously. New notions of the "latent commons" and the "undercommons" emerge if theophany illumines new forms of community and possibility. Rethinking the political commons as a manifold of ecologically just relations, might not lead us

just to mourning but also to taking joy in the wake of loss, to resilient survival as a political good. We might begin to step out from our terrified arks and desires for a pure salvation, and begin to live in adaptive and resilient ways on the planet.

“God is all things and all things God...”

- John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*

“For what is God, as Irenaeus put it, if not us fully alive? This is not some anthropological reduction of the infinite to the finite, but a recognition that the infinite is to be found at the core of each finite now, that the divine word inhabits the flesh of the world, in suffering and action.”

- Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*

Holy Ground

We could begin, again, in the middle of it all. We could begin by telling another old story, a story of man wandering in the backwoods. Call him old Stammerer. He is hiking, contemplating the last few days, years. He is a forced migrant, forced to leave a life of privilege and power for questioning the rule of empire. As an ethnic other, his people have been enslaved. The government that abuses them is building with quick progress—grand buildings and icons celebrating rulers. Access to food is meager and the abuse and ethnic discrimination is pervasive.

He does not know what to say, uncertain of who he is or where he is going. He cannot tell any stories of himself because they do not flow with ease. His memory and history is

interrupted by the comfort of empire and every time he begins to speak the grandiosity builds walls in his voice. The powers that be are too historic, immense, pervasive, out of its own agency to do anything. His confidence about what is right or just is broken. As he wanders, he joins other wanderers, other migrants and refugees who begin to teach him about living in hard conditions—what a wandering life well lived looks like. They band together in resilience and community. They live together in tough new lands and he learns religious practices and methods of living that help him bear the chaos.

In the midst of all of this moving, community teaches him how to pay attention to the signs of life again. He learns to tell old stories in new ways, and something moves him. It is in the wilderness again when the subtle mystery of everyday brilliance calls to him—a plant out of place, a remnant. It is alight with fire, burning in a way that lures him to come forward. He takes his shoes off and soaks in the sight. The epiphany spins his world slant. His world is on fire, too. Everything is consumed.

It's almost as if he hears divinity creaking through the odd haze of green and orange. Though he approaches with fear, he recognizes a familiar burning desire: a desire to shatter the foundations of the systems that captivated his imagination, a desire to reach into the heart of a system dismantling it as if it were a series of plagues to be treated, a desire to lure his people free, too. He desires to live well, on an unknown journey, in the face of an unknown. A desire to place his feet back into the dust of this planet. The ground he stands on is holy, because it—its change, its deep time—will swallow imperial power up in one way or another.

Suddenly stories ignite in his imagination, stories he might tell to inspire others. Stories of risk and possibility swell. Stories of hope occur in the everyday, complicated materiality of the planet.

And so Moses steps forwards in the arkive of speculative fabulation. The stories of his encounter with the Burning Bush on Sinai have long inspired mystical thinkers and theologians to see the world differently. Everyday bushes alight with fire, questions about prophetic justice in the face of empire. What larger task of speculative fabulation could there be?

Womanist scholar of Hebrew Bible Wilda C. Gafney deploys what she calls her “sanctified imagination” to fabulate upon the story in another way. When the people see the Divine in Exodus and Numbers, when the people receive the Torah, Gafney imagines a great unfolding divine interaction spinning out in epiphanic diversity:

As the daughters of Israel gazed upon God on the mountain, they saw smoke and fire. Within the flames and of the flames some saw great wings fluttering over the people, spreading over them her shelter of peace. Others saw an everlasting rock, She-Who-Gave-Birth and to whom her children cling as a sure defense in the time of trouble. Yet others saw a Tree of Life stretching out her branches over all the earth, feeding her children from the sacred fruit of her body. Some heard thunder and some heard birdsong. Some saw lightning and some saw rainbows. Some saw a robe of many colors, others blinding light, yet others deepest midnight spangled with the stars of heaven. Some felt the earth move and others felt the winds blow. And all of them saw God. Yet none of their descriptions alone, nor all of them together, were sufficient to convey the majesty of the FIRE OF SINAI.⁹¹

Everyone in this version sees, or imagines, or gazes upon different elemental forms of divinity, each conveying different possibilities for community. Some see forms of peace, others solidarity, others see relational and creative nourishment. Each processes the experience of Divinity, in Gafney’s imagination, as an ecological relation—earth, wind, rainbow, Tree, all connect in ways both completely sufficient, deeply insufficient and deeply in need of each other. Christians may hear resonances of glossolalia—theological diversity as the tongues of fire descend on the apostles in Acts. Theologically, just as we could call this a deeply creative and cataphatic

⁹¹ Wilda C. Gafney *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017: 105.

naming of Divinity, so too could we see the mystery in each experience, its insufficiency, material yet mysterious in that very embodiment.

I lift up these disparate yet resonant stories as possibilities of resilience and imagination. Where Noah hears the rumblings of ecological change and works to reimagine resources for survival (the arkive, again, this one of the covenant), Moses and the Hebrews encounter earthen forms of Divinity that lead them to rethink the same. We could lump this narrative in with, as Gafney rightly notes, amidst the stories classified as “theophany” or “epiphany” encounters with Divinity. These encounters, in their strangeness and their ordinariness, in their strange mix of comedy, embodied hope, and tragedy become the driving force for seeing earth differently and living in a new way.

In Chapter 1, I asked how theology might relearn to think and practice imagination differently on a tough new planet. I let the texture of an emergent geotheological genealogy in the Anthropocene, if only a *mélange* of one, begin to surface. I engaged writers who allowed “earth” itself to enter as theological concept—a concept that informed both doctrinal and constructive theology from early earthen ecotheologies to intersectional earths, from Gaian spiritualities to earthly multiplicities. I argued that different framings of what we’re now calling the “Anthropocene” serve as different kinds of apparatuses, framing devices for how to approach our contemporary climatological moment. Finally, I argued that these apparatuses expose, following Haraway, the need for new speculative fabulations that make clear our earthen context and earthly relationality. Such storytelling is all the more important in that these tools are no longer simply “preventative” or “mitigative” tools, but rather tools that we need to cultivate to shape new political ecologies of adaptation, resilience, and resistance in the wake of our new ecological contexts.

How might we begin to affectively sense the new patterns of eartheologies in the wake of global warming? Where we might discover new resiliencies? This chapter begins the speculative work of a new arkival story for such an ecotheology. I wager that one might begin to find a vital connective tissue in weaving a speculative fabulation from speculative Christian mysticism. Theophanies of divinity occur throughout biblical stories and in the imaginations of theologians. Here, I argue that looking to deeply unexamined theophany traditions of Christian thought, particularly in the work of the Irish speculative philosopher John Scottus Eriugena, as well the recurrence of apophatic notions of theophany and epiphany in contemporary writers like Roland Faber and Richard Kearney, might help in constructing what I'll call "theophanic creativity" in its juncture with "epiphanic earth." As we'll see, speculating a dynamic interrelation of divinity and earth might open up new possibilities for an ecopoetics that exposes the dynamism of the planet that takes seriously manifold contexts of the earth. Firstly, this chapter will introduce the complexity of theophany traditions and sketches the difference between the uses of "theophany" and "epiphany" in theology. It then moves into one of the most brilliant and controversial cosmological meditations on theophanic manifestations of divinity—the work of the 9th century speculative mystic John Scottus Eriugena. Finally, it traces Eriugena's theophanies into creative conversation with contemporary thinkers. Process thinker Roland Faber writes of a "transpantheistic" theophanic peace and poststructuralist thinker Richard Kearney articulates an "anatheistic" understanding of the ordinary as a site of sacramental epiphany that opens to the possibility of hospitality to the moment. We might articulate by weaving the work of these writers together hospitality to the divine and material, earthy stranger in one's midst.

Theophany and Epiphany in Classical Traditions

“Theophany” is a general concept or theological term that gestures towards the discovery or occurrence of divinity, incandescent in places or things in places.⁹² The original Greek term *theophania*, a hybrid of *theos* (God) and *phaneros* (appearance or manifestation), does not occur in the Bible. The term *is*, however, later widely applied as a category to those stories where the Divine Other appears in places, special times, visions, and discernments of Word, Spirit, Wisdom, and personal experience. One thinks of the biblical stories of Moses and the burning bush, mountains that invoke Moses’ shining face on Sinai, stones bursting with water, Elijah’s encounter with silence, clouds or the transfigurations in the gospels. Stephen Farris notes that these appearances of the divine “must be understood in light of a near paradox.” He observes, “The divine presence is made known but the stories are often replete with imagery of disruptions to nature that emphasize the otherness of God.”⁹³ More generally, one might be able say that theophany is precisely a mysterious attunement to divine energies and rhythms in a host of strange ecologies. Quite often these encounters unsettle in their strangeness of call and locale. They often demand a call for justice, or, for Moses, liberation.

Sometimes these experiences are called by another name—that of “epiphany.” Many writers will use these terms interchangeably, but they do hold slightly different poetic resonance. Etymologically, epiphany comes from the Greek *epiphaneia*, connoting a manifestation or striking appearance. This first definition is very close to that of theophany. But the breakdown

⁹² See my earlier reflection on theophanic possibility in “Theophanic Materiality: Political Ecology, Inhuman Touch, and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy” *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms*. Ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017: 203-220.

⁹³ Stephen Farris, “Theophany in the NT” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Volume 5*. Ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2009: 565.

of the word gives a bit more. Epiphany comes from the prefix *epi*, which gives a sense of proximity—upon, among, at, on the occasion of—and *phaino*, meaning to shine or appear. The word does appear itself in the New Testament in a number of places, usually referencing the glory or appearance of Christ.⁹⁴ Later the phrase would shape the Christian liturgical calendar, referring to the twelfth day of Christmas where Christ is presented to the magi. “Epiphany” as such doesn’t necessarily limit itself to Divine relationality, but *can* reference striking relations between divinity, human, nonhuman, elemental, creaturely, etc. Epiphanies evoke wonder, new insight and interpretation.

For my theological purposes here, one must acknowledge the very ambiguous and often co-terminus use of theophany and epiphany as theological categories. These terms are often used interchangeably, even if authors quite often will prefer one to the other. I will endeavor to use preferred terms of each writer, and will utilize both. Theophany will be used primarily where divinity is specifically referenced, whereas epiphany will be preferred when multiplicities of the divine, creaturely, and inter-creaturely relations occur. They are two different perspectives on an entanglement of divinity and earth—never quite separate.

Classical reflections on the occurrence of epiphanies or theophanies from the biblical to the Cappadocian Fathers to Gregory Palamas to more contemporary theologians have a way of touching upon the materiality of earthy places. These theologians often make a distinction between the “essence” and “energies” of God—God in Godself and God variously relating to creation as Creator and End. While the essence of God is unknowable, we might discern the

⁹⁴ See 2 Thessalonians 2:8, 1 Timothy 6:14, 2 Timothy 1:10, 4:1, and 4:8, and, finally, Titus 2:13.

edges of divinity's working immanently in the world in wisdom, goodness, justice, and the energetic list goes on and varies in emphasis from theologian to theologian.⁹⁵

Gregory of Nyssa, in his discussion of the burning bush in *The Life of Moses*, notes that the crackling encounter of Divinity, prophet, branches, flame, and bare feet, occurs in a material key. He writes, "Lest one think that the radiance did not come from a material substance, this light did not shine from some luminary among the stars, but came from an earthly bush and surpassed the heavenly luminaries in brilliance."⁹⁶ He continues by praising, "the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh."⁹⁷ Divinity occurs in thorn and thickets—even if Gregory still looks to what often feels like a very immaterial transcendence.⁹⁸

Environmental Otherworlds: The Irish Context

Early thinkers like Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa would serve to influence one of the most brilliant theologians of the first millennium of the Common Era. The ninth century Irish theologian John the Scot Eriugena went so far in his *Periphyseon* to say that in some sense each and every creature is a theophany of God, of God multiplying, running out into

⁹⁵ For further distinctions on this theological construct see: David Bradshaw, "The Concept of Divine Energies," *Philosophy, Theology* 18, no. 1. 2006.

⁹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*. Trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson. The Classics of Western Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press, 1978: 59.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 60.

⁹⁸ Eric Daryl Meyer observes a similar movement from material to immaterial in the thought and hermeneutics of Gregory of Nyssa. He writes that, "Gregory himself uses the image of *transfiguration*: as the dusty, tired body of Christ was found to be unbearably radiant upon a mountain, so also does the properly attuned reader find a deeper and mysterious light emerging from the plain page of scripture." See Meyer's *Inner Animalities: Theology and the End of the Human*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2018: 43 See also T. Wilson Dickinson. "Solar Energy: Theophany and the Theopoetics of Light in Gregory of Nyssa" in *Cosmology, Ecology, and the Energy of God*. Ed. Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012: 42 – 58.

and as creation.⁹⁹ Eriugena writes, “Therefore it is through bodies in bodies, not through Himself, that He shall be seen...For ‘God shall be all in all’—as if the Scripture said plainly: God alone shall be manifest in all things.”¹⁰⁰ Theophany, as well shall see, becomes for Eriugena the key theological category in his apophatic theology of creation.

The exact history of the ninth century Irish figure Eriugena is far from certain. Deidre Carabine observes that, “Eriugena was born in the first quarter of the ninth century, and he arrived at the court of Charles the Bald in the 840s, whether, as William of Malmesbury suggests because of Viking raids in Ireland is not certain, but it is most likely.”¹⁰¹ Writing in Latin, the apparent refugee Eriugena was invited into the heart of the Carolingian renaissance. Eriugena somehow learned both Greek and Latin, and with that education served as a poet, translator, writer, theologian, and liberal arts teacher. At the behest of Charles, he translated the works of Pseudo-Dionysius and learned negative theology along the way. He studied “church fathers” west and east and incorporated the insights of Maximus Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and others best he could into wide-ranging theological works. He often preferred Eastern theological concepts to Western ones. From a treatise on predestination to a beloved homily on the Gospel of John to his magnum opus of an apophatic theology of creation, the

⁹⁹ Most accessible in the United States is Myra L. Uhlfelder’s translation of the *Periphyseon: On the Division of Nature*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1976. Two translations are now standard, however, for scholarly study: I. P. Sheldon-Williams and John O’Meara, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies Book I (1968) Book II (1972), Book III (1981), Ed. Sheldon-Williams and Ludwig Bieler; Book IV (1995) Ed. Édouard Jeuneau. For more on the complexities of Eriugena’s complex understanding of Theophany and argument of the Word of Wisdom running into creation see Michael A. Sells’ *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994: 34-62. For more recent constructive and critical work, see Eugene Thacker’s *After Life*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. For more on the interaction of Eriugena as a site of “Eastern” and “Western” intellectual interaction see *Eriugena: East and West* Eds. Bernard McGinn and Willemien Otten. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁰ Sheldon-Williams, *Book I*, 57. See sections 450C-451A.

¹⁰¹ Deirdre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000: 14.

Periphyseon, Eriugena speculatively reflects on everything from the mind to the dark unknowing of divinity to a divinity-infused creation.

In many ways, scholars uncover in Eriugena's writing a sense of a divinely-enchanted world that is simultaneously Christian and Irish in its mysticism. Environmental critic Alfred K. Siewers argues that, "The ninth-century *Periphyseon (De Divisione Naturae)* by the Hiberno-Latin philosopher John Scottus Eriugena culminates early Irish Sea writings on nature from the standpoint of intellectual history...Eriugena's cosmic iconography extends a place-region analogous in qualities to the Irish Sea Otherworld on a Creation-wide scale."¹⁰² As a "geography of desire" to navigate creation, Siewers argues, Eriugena's poetics evokes similar images to Irish myth and sea writing alongside a devotion to the "Otherworld," a thin spiritual dimension of different time and space present to the ordinary dimensions of life.

As a trope, the Otherworld allows for questioning the possibilities of everyday reality. Not everything is as it appears, and myth can help to navigate various emotional or affective interactions with landscape. The "[Otherworld] is often experienced as a mirroring image that is relational, transcendent yet immanent."¹⁰³ Rather than separating experiences into strict bifurcations of transcendent and immanent, human and nonhuman, etc., the Otherworld folds these concepts together into thin, shape-shifting, fluid and present realities. Siewers argues that the scholarly time has come to reread the "trope long associated with the over-romanticized and anachronistic views of 'eco-friendly' Celts, an exoticization that obscures its real value as a model for empathetic human interaction with the environment."¹⁰⁴ Indeed, for Siewers, Eriugena's concept of theophany creates a sense of Divine creation that could be read to function

¹⁰² Alfred K. Siewers. *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009: 68.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

as a mythic Otherworld that may help to question strong divisions of human-nonhuman, human-environment, nature-culture, and more.

Of course, Celtic contexts and imaginations of ecology do inform Eriugena's writing. As Mary Low writes in her *Celtic Christianity and Nature: Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions*, "Irish culture was changed by Christianity certainly, but it would also be true to say that Christianity was changed by Irish culture."¹⁰⁵ The cross-transformation of Irish cultures and Christian cultures created the context where Eriugena's theology and environmental imagination could thrive. As Low continues, "The idea that divine or supernatural beings were active in the landscape, and could occasionally be encountered there, was common in both traditions."¹⁰⁶ The spiritualizing blurring of divine and planetary, nature and culture, is common in the mythic stories of Irish and biblical writing. In Irish nature poetry (Christian or otherwise), "The growth and decay of vegetation, the strength or weakness of the sun, the presence or absence of natural produce, the friendliness or hostility of the elements, were all minutely observed and

¹⁰⁵ Mary Low. *Celtic Christianity and Nature: Early Irish and Hebridean Traditions*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1996: 4. There are a number of new treatments of the interaction with local cultural symbols and spirituality along with forms of missionary Christianity Celtic or Nordic culture. Old symbols return in new symbols of Christianity. Often symbols are not subsumed or conquered, but create hybrid cross-transformational religiosities. We might anachronistically call these polydox spiritualities. One of the best treatments of these interactions is G. Ronald Murphy, S.J.,'s *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North*. London: Oxford University Press, 2013. Murphy argues that the Nordic tree of life, Yggdrasil (which shares many historical interactions and resonances with the Celtic tree of life image) dialogues and dances with the symbol of the cross in Christian practice. He observes the "poetic rhyming of tree and cross" where "The image of the tree in medieval times...presents an interrelated concept of the world above and below, the realm of plant and animal as mutually dependent and devouring, and of transformation of plant into animal, animal into plant." p. 4-6. Yggdrasil and the cross mutually transform and reform one another's expectations.

¹⁰⁶ Low., 23.

acknowledged.”¹⁰⁷ Often, attention to the ecological is paid differently in pre-modern texts because ecology might precisely be the locale of divine encounter.

Many contemporary scholars, in fact, now turn to pre-modern texts to glean alternative ecological stories they might tell in the Anthropocene. In his *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*, biblical scholar Ken Stone notes that, “The ancient writers who gave us those [biblical] texts could not have imagined either our tremendous population growth or the horrors of contemporary factory farming. They were writing about the world they saw around them, not the one we inhabit.”¹⁰⁸ History and culture, of course, shape any perspective, and premodern writings are no different. Still, biblical scholars like Stone and scholars of late antiquity like Patricia Cox Miller argue, informed with critical animal studies, that we might see other possibilities. As Stone concludes, we might see in “other texts, the welfare of humans and the welfare of animals are inextricably intertwined.”¹⁰⁹ Theology might turned to these different sources to lift up different emphases and new pathways regarding animality, materiality, and spirituality. Neglected Irish texts and traditions read today with new lenses might serve to make those new pathways, too.

For example, in a tenth century Irish text, *The Evernew Tongue Here Below*, a number of sages gather, and the apostle Philip appears from heaven. Philip begins to explain the Christ in cosmic terms, arguing that the incarnation implicates not just human beings but the nonhuman as well, “For every material and every element and every nature which is seen in the world were all

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰⁸ Ken Stone, *Reading the Hebrew Bible with Animal Studies*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018: 179.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 180. See also Patricia Cox Miller, *In the Eye of the Animal: Zoological Imagination in Ancient Christianity*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Miller argues that even while a logic of human exceptionalism runs throughout many writers in late antiquity, a curious practice of zoological imagination in many texts that link continuities between human and animal.

combined in the body in which Christ arose, that is in the body of every human person.”¹¹⁰ The implications for the rest of creation are staggering here as well, and not too far from the cosmic Christ of the biblical Book of Colossians. As Low observes, “It is not humans alone who become a new creation through his risen body, but the elements, all the raw materials of creation are saved as well. There are parallels here with Irenaeus’s doctrine of recapitulation.”¹¹¹ All things cohere thinly in Christ and the cosmic Christ becomes a veiled Otherworld for creation. Eriugena works to create something similar through the concept of “theophany.”

Theophanic Creation: Divine Nothingness and Abyssal Earth

Eriugena’s already mentioned masterpiece, the *Periphyseon* (Or *On the Division of Nature*) is a triumph of apophatic theology and an oft-maligned, forgotten book in the annals of history. But, as Michael Sells notes, Eriugena’s “masterwork...stands out as the first major Latin work of apophatic discourse.”¹¹² His influence on later major thinkers as a translator of Pseudo-Dionysius and as an original thinker on later theologians such as Nicholas of Cusa remains undervalued, even as Eriugena studies undergoes a renaissance as more theologians reach back and recognize the brilliance of this speculative creativity.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Low, 180.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹² Michael A. Sells. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994: 5.

¹¹³ See Deidre Carabine, *John Scottus Eriugena*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.; John F. Gavin, *A Celtic Christology: The Incarnation according to John Scottus Eriugena*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014.; John J. O’Meara, *Eriugena*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.; Dermot Moran. *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.; Willemien Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*. New York: E.J. Brill, 1991.; Eoghan Mac Aogaín. *Eriugena: Medieval Irish Philosopher, Poet, and Translator, Second Edition*. Portlaoise, Ireland: Everttype, 2017.; Sergei N. Sushkov. *Being and Creation in the Theology of John Scottus Eriugena: An Approach to a New Way of Thinking*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017.

Much of Eriugena's loss to history results from being posthumously called an ecclesiastical heretic. Divinity and manifold creation are so intimately related that Eriugena identifies them strongly in near univocal language. Because of these moves Eriugena was later accused of pantheist. That accusation led to fabulated (or at least unsubstantiated) stories of Eriugena's death. As the stories go, the teacher and professor was lecturing to his students one day when the class started to get out of his control. The students intuited heresy and rose up, took over the class, and stabbed Eriugena to death with their styli.

Such condemnations don't necessarily surprise. The *Periphyseon* is a complicated and multifaceted work. The ideas within are complicated and poetically interrelated, and Eriugena structures the work as a dialogue rather than a traditional treatise, leading to some questions of what position is being taken. Throughout the work, a *nutritor* or master/teacher and an *alumnus* or disciple/student inquire *together* in to the nature of Creation. The dialogue itself is vital, however. At times the teacher and the student aide each other in reaching higher conclusions than one might reach on their own. As Sells argues, "In effect, the nutritor and alumnus become two equal voices pushing each other toward a conclusion that neither seems willing or able to conceive alone."¹¹⁴ Indeed, it seems here that theology itself is a relational or dialogical reality at its core. No truth can be reflected on wisely without the aide of community, and no one on their own carries a complete and clear understanding of reality.

The *Periphyseon* begins a sketch of the all-encompassing category of "nature" into four related and creative folds. As Michael Sells helpfully summarizes,

four categories: (1) that which is uncreated and creates (the deity as creator god); (2) that which his created and creates (the eternal ideas or 'primordial causes within the divine word); (3) that which his created and does not create (the world); and (that which his not created and does not create. The first and last categories are identified with deity, the

¹¹⁴ Sells, 38

first as creator deity, the last as that which transcends all predications and dualisms, including the duality between creator and created.¹¹⁵

Modes of creativity, divine and creaturely, help Eriugena establish a coherent understanding of what happens in creation, even as the system often unsays and blurs those very categories. Dermot Moran writes, “In the four divisions of nature, we have not only a typical mediaeval cosmology of a hierarchy of being but also a dynamic process of subjectivity becoming objective, of the infinite becoming finite, the drama of God’s and of human self-externalisation in the world, which anticipated the idealist systems of Schelling and Hegel.”¹¹⁶ And even the most limited of creation participates in the infinite creativity of the divine. The point of this chapter is not to give a full account of each of these orders and their complexities, but rather to focus on a distinctive feature of this imaginary.

While a number of scholars have recently focused on other doctrinal loci such as theological anthropology¹¹⁷ and christology,¹¹⁸ creation remains the central concern of Eriugena’s thought. As Sells continues, “The entire schema is based upon an emanation pattern of procession and return, the emanation out from the deity with creation and the eventual return of all things back to and beyond their primal source.”¹¹⁹ The *exitus* and *reditus* pattern of divine creativity in Neoplatonic thought influences Eriugena’s sense of the divine, but Eriugena also places his own unique apophatic spin on that divine creativity.¹²⁰ As Donald Duclow adds,

¹¹⁵ Sells, 36

¹¹⁶ Moran, xiii-xiv.

¹¹⁷ See Otten.

¹¹⁸ See Gavin.

¹¹⁹ Sells, 36.

¹²⁰ Sushkov notes that a linear understanding of the pattern is inappropriate in Eriugena’s thought and might more appropriately be described as a coterminous *exitus* and *reversio* that undoes any pretense to hierarchy in Eriugena’s thought. According to Sushkov, “the Neoplatonic *hierarchical* model is just inapplicable to Eriugena’s system, simply because in the reality he is looking for there is no hierarchy at all. *Hierarchy* and *division*, as they occur in the

Eriugena “does not simply repeat either the Neoplatonic schema or its modified formulations in Dionysius and Maximus the Confessor. Rather, he adapts the schema to a comprehensive metaphysic which bears a distinctively personal stamp, both in its novel framework of the *divisio naturae* and in the bold metaphor which articulates its internal dynamics: the self-creation of God.”¹²¹ It will be the poetic terms that weave together each division of nature that will make Eriugena’s brilliance shine forth—the concepts of divine nothingness alongside that of *theophania*.

What makes Eriugena’s theological understanding of creation innovative is, firstly, a unique interpretation of Divinity and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Eriugena’s imagination shimmers through front and center when discussing how to attribute names to divinity. In Book One, he focuses on the infinity of God and the mysterious creativity God enacts. God “alone is understood as creating all things without a beginning (*anarchos*), since He alone is the primary Cause of all things made from and through him.”¹²² God alone is understood as “anarchic,” without a finite beginning per se and therefore created origins are sometimes difficult to pin down.

This discussion of Divine infinity and reframing of that Divinity as anarchic leads to a discussion between the Teacher and the Student in the *Periphyseon* on the meaning of the phrase

Periphyseon...are exactly what Eriugena seeks to overcome as categories appropriate to a *metaphysical* way of thinking...It follows then that, neither hierarchy nor coercion dominate in the reality of the absolute whole, but *Love* alone.” See Sushkov, 11-15.

¹²¹ Donald Duclow, “Divine Nothingness and Self-Creation in John Scotus Eriugena” *The Journal of Religion*. Vol 57, No. 2. April 1977: 116.

¹²² Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 14. I shall be often using quotations from the Uhlfelder translation in what follows. In Sheldon-Williams, Book 1, see sections 451C-451D: “Nec immerito, quia talis naturae species de deo solo recte praedicatur, qui solus omnia creans ANAPXOC, hoc est sine principio, intelligitur esse, quia principalis causa omnium quae ex ipso et per ipsum facta sunt solus est, ac per hoc et omnium quae ex se sunt finis est; ipsum enim omnia appetunt” (emphasis on ANARCHOS, as a divine name, in the original).

creatio ex nihilo, or “creation from nothing.” The Teacher and the Student engage in a long set of conversations on how they should understand the “nothing” by which God creates. But they discover the phrase is somewhat misleading. For them, “nothing” is not an erased and nebulous entity but instead another naming in the process of negation. Nothing colloquially means “nothing” and because God is not bound by time or space or any definition of essence, only God, properly, *is* nothing—the Creator *is* Divine Nihil. As Dermot Moran succinctly puts it, “‘Nothing’ is another name for God and in fact Eriugena believes it is often used as such in the Scriptures.”¹²³

How do we understand this Divine Nihil? Deirdre Carabine expands on that Nothingness with language as contradictory and topsy-turvy as Eriugena’s that, “God creates all things out of the ‘superessential nothingness’ that God transcendentally is.”¹²⁴ Carabine’s sentence might be more confusing than clarifying at first. The language of “super,” “for Eriugena, is not to be thought of as a strict “beyond” but as negation. Eriugena’s Teacher states, “The statement does not, however, express, what it is that is more than essence when it declares that God is not any of those things which have being, but is more than they are. It does not at all, however, define what that being is.”¹²⁵ Eriugena is aware that one might charge that “superessentiality” is just another definition. And it is important that for the sake of the *Periphyseon*, Nothingness reigns supreme as a metaphor over a superessential essence.

Eriugena’s sense of the implications of Divine Nothingness and language goes further than just the human experience of the Divine, however. He makes a central theological claim

¹²³ Moran., 236.

¹²⁴ Carabine, 46. There is much in contemporary poststructuralist thought, especially in Derrida’s concerns about a hyperessentiality in apophatic theology, but Eriugena’s understanding of Divine Nothingness seems to open the playing field up here.

¹²⁵ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 27.

about the doctrine of God as well. The Nothingness of Divinity is also applicable to Divinity itself. Donald Duclow writes that, “John the Scot presses this connection to its utmost limits when, on the basis of the divine *nihil*, he denies knowledge of the divine essence not only to all created intellects but also to God himself. John insists that knowledge is contingent upon number and the differentiation among beings”¹²⁶ Because “knowing,” “reflecting,” or “understanding something relies on finite contexts, the Nothingness of God *does not know Godself*. And as creation unfolds, the Divine mystery would seem to get even more mysterious.

We might ask what does this radical nothingness and apophatic language implies for Creation? As Eriugena’s Teacher notes, “By the term *nothing* no matter is thought of, no cause of existing things, no procession or occasion followed by the creation of those things with being followed, no thing coessential or coeternal with God, no thing outside God subsisting by itself or derived from some source from which God, so to speak, took some matter for fashioning the world.”¹²⁷ Nothing is coeternal with God or outside of God. “Nothing” is precisely none other than God and God is “Nothing.” Eriugena chooses to collapse the difference here. As both Carabine and Donald Duclow note Eriugena’s important move, “creation *ex nihilo* is therefore nothing other than creation *ex deo*; it is manifestation, the procession of transcendent negativity into the differentiated otherness of being and essence.”¹²⁸

Creation is, according to Eriugena, *self-creation*. God makes and *is made*. As Eriugena’s Teacher notes in a remarkable passage,

We should not therefore understand God and creation as two different things, but as one and the same. For creation subsists in God and God is created in creation in a remarkable and ineffable way, manifesting Himself and though invisible, making Himself visible, and though incomprehensible, making Himself comprehensible, and though hidden,

¹²⁶ Duclow: 111.

¹²⁷ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book III, 142. (Uhlfelder translation).

¹²⁸ Duclow, 114-115.

revealing Himself, and though unknown, making Himself known; though lacking form and species, endowing Himself with form and species, though superessential, making Himself essential, though supernatural, making Himself natural; though simple, making Himself compound; though free from accidents, making Himself subject to accidents and an accident; and, though infinite, making Himself finite; though uncircumscribed, making Himself circumscribed; though above time, making Himself temporal; though above place, making Himself local; though creating everything, making Himself created in everything. The Maker of all, made in all, begins to be eternal and though motionless, moves into everything and becomes all things in all things.¹²⁹

Creator and Creation are synonymous, and in a dialectical way Divinity is both Nothing and Everything. Eriugena speculates that this is the way it's always been, and God and Creation here are what would we call in contemporary terms, “mutually immanent.” That the manifold divisions of creation are none other than divine manifestation is the more radical and unbelievable point for Eriugena’s Teacher and Student.

As self-creation, the immanent transcendence of the Divine for Eriugena might be considered doubly under the name of “theo-poetics”—of “God-making.” Divinity makes creation and is made in creation. *Theos* engages in *poiesis* and is poietically made by the manifestation of created others. That relationship offers the occasion for flights of metaphorical imagination about encounters for divinity and simultaneously recognizes the poietic reciprocity of God making creation, creation-making God. Here, this ancient tradition of God making, making God offers new and often forgotten histories. Like Catherine Keller notes in her reflections on theo-poetics, ancient and contemporary, “My point is not to idealize any ancestral schematisms but to amplify counterpoint resonances working within a received tradition.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ “God is Everything everywhere, Whole in the whole, Maker and made, Seer and seen, Time and Place, Essene and Substance of all, Accident, and, to put it simply Everything That Truly Is and Is Not, superessential in essences, supersubstantial in substances, Creator above all creation, created within all creation. . .” Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book III, 196-197. Uhlfelder translation.

¹³⁰ Catherine Keller, “Theo-poetics : A Becoming History” in *The Art of Anatheism*, Eds., Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018: 31.

Like an epiphany itself the Teacher and the Student sit with each other not quite able to believe what they've come to believe. Earlier in the *Periphyseon*, the Student notes that the argument, "seems to me incomparably deeper and more remarkable, viz., that God Himself is both the maker of all things and is made in all things...Such a judgment will be regarded as monstrous even by those who are thought wise when they consider the manifold variety of things visible and invisible, whereas God is one."¹³¹ His concern is that this language will be too controversial for fellow Christians. Eriugena does not stop there, however. He offers a theological category to these makings, calling all creatures "theophanies" and all creation a theophany of God. Creation becomes the mutual immanence of Divine Nothingness and the mystery of the Manifold Creation of theophanies.

Biblical theophanies such as the dark mystery of the abyss of creation in Genesis (indeed, Eriugena says that "earth" is just another name for "abyss"), clouds, fire, alongside other elemental imagery from Exodus and the Gospel of John flow and circulate throughout Eriugena's theological imagination. We are, like the student at one point in Book Three, "enveloped by the dark mists of my reflections."¹³² As Carabine writes, "In the *Periphyseon*, clouds symbolize the only means of experiencing a theophany of the invisible God (P.V 905C). The ascent in the 'cloud of contemplation' is described as the highest theophany, the vision of God 'face to face,' wherein each will see God according to capacity."¹³³ Metaphors of dark fire and cloud, so prominent in the apophatic traditions of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius find new homes in Eriugena's work. As Sells writes, "Theophany is a form of apparition,

¹³¹ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book III, 162.

¹³² Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book III, 142.

¹³³ Carabine 106.

[Eriugena] asserts, comparable to the appearance in visions of long-dead prophets.”¹³⁴ Theophany is indeed a cloud of contemplating possible impossibilities, divinity in the flesh.

We may now hear, in Eriugena’s theophanic creativity, Siewers’ trope of the mysterious thin boundary between the everyday world and the Irish Otherworld eking through. Any encounter in any context, any encounter with any creature, can be a mysterious encounter with Divinity. Carabine notes that, “Eriugena’s preference for a more dynamic understanding of the unfolding of *natura* over against the more traditional understanding of cause and effect, of creator and creation as having strictly demarcated boundaries, is one of the most interesting underlying themes in the *Periphyseon*.”¹³⁵ In this way, Eriugena folds Divinity into the entirety of creation, not just the incarnation. The mystery of Divine Nothingness and Divine self-creation may lead human inquirers into new contexts and possibilities.

Theophany itself becomes the basis for theological imagination. As Willemien Otten notes in *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena*, “A striking convergence of divine transcendence and divine immanence becomes feasible for the human mind through theophany.”¹³⁶ Human reflection on transcendent-immanence becomes more complex and possible in wise discernment and participation in theophany. Theologically, theophany seems to offer for the possibility of transgressing the limits of God-talk. Otten continues, “At the same time creation appears to be lifted to a level where it can directly communicate with God, as if the divine nature has completely accepted and surrounded it... Thus through theophany there arises a reciprocity between *creator* and *creatura*.”¹³⁷ Theophanies therefore become both ontological and epistemological conditions for apophatic understanding. Through the contemplations of

¹³⁴ Sells, 54.

¹³⁵ Carabine, 25.

¹³⁶ Otten, 68.

¹³⁷ Otten, 69.

speculative fantasy in theophany (a mix of imagination and memory for Eriugena), human kind can sense a rich sense of relationality within the realm of nature. “*Universitas*, therefore, is grasped by the *multiplex theoria*, the anarchic multiple contemplation of the human mind.”¹³⁸ In manifold contemplation, the mind encounters apophatic others, Divine and creaturely which urge careful considerations. John F. Gavin argues that for Eriugena, “Mystical contemplation is a gift, a flight into the divine intimacy.”¹³⁹ Intimate wisdom and mysterious intimacy become the imaginative space given by theophany.

Eriugena’s theopoetics is more radical than other early theologians, however. His theophanic creation reads as a near-pantheism. The reciprocity of Divinity and creation seems far too close for some. But, as Dermot Moran notes, “Eriugena is not a pantheist, and his strong monistic statements concerning the identity of divinity and creation are always counterbalanced by assertions of the absolute difference between God and creation.”¹⁴⁰ Moran might be overstating his case with the phrase “absolute difference” in a text where Divinity is constantly spoken about in univocal terms. Divinity, manifest in bodies, linking all to all. Eriugena continues that God, “runs *throughout all things* and never stays but by His running fills out all things...For He is at rest unchangingly in Himself, never departing from the stability of His Nature; yet He sets Himself in Motion through all things in order that those things which essentially subsist by Him may be.”¹⁴¹ The whole of physical reality billions of creatures made manifest through divinity, billions of mysterious burning bushes—an apophatic cosmology returning to the divine.

¹³⁸ Moran, 259.

¹³⁹ Gavin, 101.

¹⁴⁰ Moran, 89,

¹⁴¹ Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, Book I, 61. Sections 452C-D.

That apophatic cosmology works in ways that would trip up a caricature of pantheistic univocality, however. Theophany is a negative relationality, too.¹⁴² As William Franke notes, “Not only God but *all* things are unknowable in their essences, since they have their being and essence only from God, who is unknowable.”¹⁴³ All things, despite perceived opposition, burn and coincide in their life in the divine, all in all. But that Divine self-creation means for a thoroughgoing apophatic cosmology where both Divinity does not fully know the Divine self and where creatures become mysterious to their core. The more radical implication of this argument, one that Eriugena doesn’t necessarily address, would be that if apophasis functions all the way down cosmologically, God might not fully know God’s creation either, and a mutual understanding of apophatic depth might result in that mutually apophatic immanence.

Environmental critic and scholar Alfred Siewers, like Franke, does make this apophatic claim for creation qua creation, however. Siewers writes that in Eriugena’s “view of Creation in which there is dynamic engagement of divine manifestations with the physical world outside of God’s essence, highlighting the mysterious non-objectifiable nature of the ultimate essence of things.”¹⁴⁴ The mysterious depth of creatures as theophany means that no creature is fully colonizable, completely tame, understandable, controllable, or categorizable. At the end of the day, the mysterious depth of creatures calls out for a mutual recognition of mystery. And that mystery might creates cosmological mystery in the Divine.

¹⁴² Jean Trouillard, “Erigene et la théophanie créatrice” in *The Mind of Eriugena*. Eds., John J. O’Meara and Ludwig Bieler. Dublin, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1973. “Le retournement érigénien tiendrait, peut-être dans cette formule: Ce que l’histoire fait temporellement apparaître est qui intemporellement soutient l’histoire. Et ce qui se manifeste alors comme totalité simultanée ne peut se fonder que sur une négation de la manifestation elle-même. Car cette négation est créatrice du Créateur.” p. 111.

¹⁴³ William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts. Volume 1: Classic Formulations*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001: 183.

¹⁴⁴ Siewers, 68-9.

Contemporary Eastern Orthodox theologian Kallistos Ware, riffing off on the theophany traditions of Christian might poetically exhibit a similar meditation. Ware argues that with a spiritual attention to the earth, “To contemplate nature, then...is to discover, not so much through our discursive reason as through our spiritual intellect, that the whole universe is a cosmic Burning Bush, filled with the divine Fire yet not consumed.”¹⁴⁵ The practice of seeing the cosmos in spiritual intellect may reveal the burning of divine energies throughout all of creation, sustaining and enlivening creation with spirit back to an end in God.

While Gregory, Eriugena and others let their meditations of divinity flow to relational creativity for brief moments, they quickly flow back to the oneness of their nonmaterial divinity.¹⁴⁶ Matter becomes a passive mode or mediation of divine knowledge, incidental, trumped by the occurrence of divinity. And even while their thought might unravel at its tensions between that oneness of God and the multiplicity of creation, the light of knowledge, wisdom, might seem to take precedence in many places in their writing over the mystery of the encounter.¹⁴⁷ As David Bradshaw observes about the concept of theophany in some of that

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Jurretta Jordan Heckscher “A ‘Tradition’ That Never Existed: Orthodox Christianity and the Failures of Environmental History” In *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*. Ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013: 141.

¹⁴⁶ I would argue that this phenomenon is actually more complex in Eriugena. Again, see Sells.

¹⁴⁷ Mary-Jane Rubenstein gestures to some of the possibilities of the deconstruction of this tension in her piece, “The Fire Each Time: Dark Energy and the Breath of Creation” in *Cosmology, Ecology, and the Energy of God*. Ed. Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012: 26-41. Especially when she writes, on page 40-1 that, “if the energies cannot be dislodged safely from the divine essence *or* from creation, then they do seem to bind the whole lot into an eternal, synergetic dance. This is not to say that God is creation or that creation is God, but by virtue of the eternal energy that ‘bridges’ them, it is possible that both become, and unbecome, in mysterious relation to each other.”

heritage of Eastern Orthodox thought, “Nature is theophany, but only because it points beyond itself to its source.”¹⁴⁸

Theophany as Transpantheism and Ecopoiesis

Eriugena’s apophatic theology of creation, his reflection on theophany as divinity wrapped all-in-all opens new possibilities for creation. As Donald Duclow surmises, “‘If we may borrow the language of process thought, we may speak of a *dipolar* conception of God in John the Scot. There is a primordial divine nature, characterized as transcendence and nothingness; and there is a consequent nature, characterized as theophany and divine self-creation.”¹⁴⁹ Even if he privileges a kind of plenitude of the primordial nature of God, Eriugena creates a system where the mysterious mutual immanence of Creator and creature is possible. Theophany as a concept of divine creativity in his mind as a creation in process, unfolding in intimate relationality with divinity.

We might say that if there’s a contemporary resonance to Eriugena’s sense of theophania, it is in rediscovered possibilities of intimate and incarnate Divinity. Contemporary theology might construe such an elemental Divinity as a “promiscuous incarnation” or an incarnate pneumatology.¹⁵⁰ Contemporary theologians are recovering the ecological dimensions of incarnation and pneumatology, from the *ruach* breath that flows in biblical creatures to the

¹⁴⁸ He is referring, in particular, to the thought of Evagrius of Pontus. See, David Bradshaw, “The *Logoi* of Beings in Greek Patristic Thought.” In *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Environment, Nature, and Creation*. Ed. John Chryssavgis and Bruce V. Foltz. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013: 15.

¹⁴⁹ Duclow, 118.

¹⁵⁰ Laurel Schneider, “Promiscuous Incarnation” in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*. Ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010: 231-246.

language of *spiritus vivificantem*—the spirit that vivifies and animates all creatureliness, creation, and creativity. Incarnation spirit is notoriously slippery, and often difficult to pin down. It is elemental, mysterious, rendered passive and feminine behind misogynistic and masculine depictions of Father and Son. Spirit’s movement through creation often lends itself to a pantheistic set of images—spirit of the world. In some ways, Eriugena’s theophanic imagination is an imagination of a thin, enchanted, and mysterious creation infused with the dark beauty of Divinity.

It might be possible to say that what Eriugena offers is a panentheism that leans towards a spiritual reciprocity, even if it doesn’t quite get to the radicality of contemporary ecotheologies of reciprocity. The intimate entwining of Creator and creaturely, Divinity and earth, in theophanic conviviality leans towards a potential dance of reciprocity, a near perichoresis of God and flesh. Contemporary process thinker Roland Faber takes the concept of “theophany” even further into what later theologians would call a “coincidence of opposites” or what Alfred North Whitehead would, in fact, call “mutual immanence,” the intimate bond of Creator and creaturely coaxing each other in bonds of self-creation. As Faber puts it, “it is Whitehead [’s] fundamental conviction that God suffers the world, understands it from the inside, and inhales the world as fully prehended in God’s consequent nature, which in divine healing is the apotheosis of the world *into* God and its everlasting life *in* God.”¹⁵¹ In Faber’s Whiteheadean thought, as for Eriugena, the language of deification—of theopoiesis—figures strongly.

In his *The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy, and Multireligious Engagement*, Faber offers the term “transpantheism” as a specific description of mutual immanence in Whitehead’s thought than “panentheism,” God-in-all. Faber’s reluctance to call

¹⁵¹ Roland Faber, *The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy, and Multireligious Engagement*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017: 157.

Whiteheadian mutuality panentheistic relies on a number of connotations the word possesses. He writes, “panentheism grants only asymmetric reciprocity. God always remains the exceeding ‘more than all’ (God is in all, but exceeds the all of the world) to which creation conforms as the embedded ‘less than all’ (the world, per definition, cannot exceed God.)”¹⁵² Faber fears that in panentheism God still subordinates creation in a dominology that controls creation from a distance (if even an intimate distance). “But, Whitehead,” Faber continues, “instead, understands mutual immanence as mutual transcendence: both God and the world exceed one another and, only for that reason, can be seen by Whitehead to be mutual instruments of novelty for one another.”¹⁵³ Each mutually indwells one another just as much as each exceeds the other to produce forms of novelty. The prefix of “trans” to pantheism offers indicates movement and process for Faber, even if I would argue that “panentheistic” thinkers more often than not do beautifully construct that sense of becoming.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, what begins to emerge here is, at first glance, not dissimilar from the Divine Nihil that pervades Eriugena’s writing and the apophatic cosmology that results.

For Faber, Whitehead’s mutual immanence gives a deeper understanding of the concept of theopoetics. Faber notes that, “In a completely different context, “theopoetics” first appears in antiquity as the elongated form for *theosis*, the oriental Christian symbol attempting to point at the aim of creation (and human existence) to be, and to be reached in, a process of ‘deification’: *theo-poiesis* as *becoming* (being made, being re-made in the image of the) divine.”¹⁵⁵ The

¹⁵² Ibid., 158.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, *Panentheism Across the World’s Traditions*. Eds. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

¹⁵⁵ Faber., 178.

deification of creation, of earth, into the divine is precisely where Faber sees mutual immanence possible.

While in classical orthodox antiquity, Divine Omnipotence and agency structures the deification of Creation, in process thought the poiesis is deeply reciprocal. Faber invokes Whitehead at this point to construct a new definition of *theosis*: “*God creates the world and the world as the world creates God.*”¹⁵⁶ Both God and the world unfold in a relationship of becoming. Divinity unfolds in the becoming of creation. That process of becoming is exemplified in Divinity’s persuasive power and therefore theoetics “wants to capture God’s tender seduction to meaningful and intense harmonies of peace in the midst of the wreckage of the world as the cosmic process is caught in the antagonisms of power struggles.”¹⁵⁷ Theoetics and the self-creation of divinity, then, in attempts to lure creation to meaning that holds the contradictions, tragedies, and joys of existence together. That lure and allure of creation leads us to be more attentive to the world and the ecological flows of the earth. “Theoetics demands a mystical spirituality of the unification with the world of the Poet in the flow of divine (persuasive) activity through it. Without dissolving the Poet, rather holding the world in this oscillating flow, we are called to hope for our unification with the poetic process *in* the warp and weft of the manifold that is the world and to feel it in every new event of its happening.”¹⁵⁸ Divinity becomes wrapped up in the processes, world situations, and ecological contexts of creation that we create and find ourselves in.

As such, for Faber, his understanding of the mutual immanence of God and World profoundly is profoundly ecological. “In this relational manifold, the Poet becomes its healing

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

immanence insofar as this healing becomes manifest in the ecological translucency of *mutual* being toward and within the other...such a theopoetics induces *ecotheosis*.¹⁵⁹ Divinity engages in diverse processes of healing within the complex chaos and tragic unfoldings of creation. As Alfred North Whitehead famously put it, God is the “poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his [sic] vision of truth, beauty, and goodness.”¹⁶⁰

At this point, Faber, too, turns to the concept of “theophany” to articulate how the poetry of Divinity works in the creation and the consequent nature of God. According to Faber, the “world is ‘made’ God in the sense of a *theosis* (*apotheosis*, *ecotheosis*)” and “the self-creative reflection of the divine in the world process creates poetic images of God—diversified in every event, nexus, society, organism, and universe.”¹⁶¹ Though Faber does not engage Eriugena’s thought at any point, the language of theophany here sounds deeply resonant with that of the *Periphyseon*. God pervades the unfolding process and manifold event of creation and becomes made in each of them as theophany. That manifestation of God—if the word “manifestation” is not too static in its outlook for Faber’s version of process thought—brings forth Divinity as a radical form of creative and saving love.

For Faber, theophany takes on two characteristics: “[1] of the *diffusion* of God in the multiplicity of becoming, [2] of the love *of* the multiplicity of becoming. This infusion of the divine *in* multiplicity names the *in-sistence* of God; and the divine love of multiplicity identifies this in-sistence as *polyphilia*.¹⁶² God is folded into each event of becoming in mutual

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶⁰ Alfred North Whitehead. *Process & Reality: Corrected Edition*. Ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978: 346.

¹⁶¹ Faber, 187-8.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 190. Faber is not the only theologian who has recently turned to the language of insistence, John D. Caputo has as well. *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013.

immanence, and the possibility of divinity insists in each event. And this insistence is precisely the result of divine love for the multiplicity of creation. As Faber continues, “It is not the power of love, but the love *in* all power, saving its havoc of becoming from eternal loss and indulgent intensity that lacks harmony. It is theophany: the translucency of divine harmonization *within* the adventurous becoming, its instigation, and its everlasting meaning.”¹⁶³ Divinity insists in manifold love to offer possibilities and resilience in navigating the risky and real time losses. Divinity insists on resilience and survival of the adventure.

The multiplicity of love takes on ethical guts for Faber in that it insists for the margins in the midst of violent and domineering power. Polyphilia is intensely ethical in its outlook: “Polyphilia recognizes the marginalized, the excluded, the minimized, the last, the least, and the forgotten. It exhorts the spiritual and ethical intuition, impulse, and experience, of the value of all becoming in its full complexity, divergence, and multiplicity.”¹⁶⁴ The love of the multiple, in its redirection (or expansion) of value, lures forth spiritual and ethical sense, perhaps a sense that I would call “speculatively fabulative” in this writing, that seeks to value complexity and critique domineering attitudes towards the multiplicity of creation. Faber continues, “It sides with a religiosity of remembrance, of the tragedy of suppression and exclusion, and it arises within a praxis of religion that counteracts these oppressive unifications under the imperialistic, patriarchal, racist, sexist, misogynist, classist One.”¹⁶⁵ Love of manifold creation emerges in memory, history, and the practice of social justice—we might call this theology, as well.

That ethical intuition of theophany means that one must see the in-sistence of divine love in every ecological and earthy creature, every tragic context, every movement of creativity. He

¹⁶³ Ibid., 190-1.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 192

¹⁶⁵ Ibid..

writes, “on a cosmic level, the theophanic in-sistence of God will also insist on the mutual translucency of all organisms and environments in a cosmos.”¹⁶⁶ Love of the manifold asks one to see intersectional justice, ecological interactions, and the vast coalescing of structural powers that attempt to deaden or abuse that multiplicity. We might see polyphilia as an invitation to learn climate science, reimagine matter, attend to the tragic beauties of creation and collaborate with human and nonhuman others for the sake of just political action. Faber concludes, “All happening is bound together in an *ecotheosis* of the theophanic manifestation of peace.”¹⁶⁷ Divinity lures forth possibilities to navigate new situations and in-sists within creaturely collaborations for planetary peace and health in the midst of (not in spite of) complexity.

Faber’s understanding of *ecotheosis* as an ecoprocess takes on very specific ecological concerns. Whereas much ecotheology is oriented towards saving, “the world’s nature *from* human influences that, eventually, will lead to human extinction is problematic *insofar* as it is motivated by the aim of human *survival*.”¹⁶⁸ That is to say, a pure kind of climate prevention or idealistic vision of pristine nature is largely motivated by the anthropocentric and selfish desire for human preservation rather than the survival and resilience of planetary systems. Humans like to imagine themselves as saviors. Faber suggests that we must look to a more integrative path: “If there *is* a human mind, subjective experience, art science and love, then, we don’t want to end up in a reductive dualism (and any reductive monism is based on such a dualism), we must acknowledge that all subjectivity must be part of nature that the differences “in” nature must be gradual and not alien, intensive and not essential.”¹⁶⁹ Creature and creation must be thought of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹⁶⁸ Roland Faber, “Ecotheology, Ecoprocess, and *Ecotheosis*: A Theopoetical Intervention” *SaThZ* 12, 2008: 80.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 82.

in integrated and complex ways. Like I noted in Chapter 1, binaries of “nature” and “culture,” “human” and “animal” must be rethought to take adequate account of our creaturely context. Indeed, rather than thinking in singular terms, with a singular locale, eco- or atmospheric system, or species in mind, we must think about the manifold complexes of earth and cosmos. Faber argues that we must look at the *creative advance of occurrences of togetherness*.¹⁷⁰ The manifold differences of creation along with their convivial becoming together in the wake of *and as* systems contributing to global warming is key for imagining our cosmopolitical situation. Conviviality as such will become key for thinking about that political situation in Chapter 5.

The ecoprocess view that Faber offers flows into three important features for ecotheosis. “The first feature to mention in an ecoprocess view of God is that it offers a very different account of the Divine in its relationship to the world by introducing a *radically ecological understanding of God*.”¹⁷¹ Like Eriugena’s making and being made Divinity, Faber’s understanding of mutuality between God and world embeds Divinity within ecological exchanges of all kinds and God is fundamentally interrelated to the ecological world.

Secondly, Faber argues, “this radically ecological doctrine of God is...not directed toward ‘equality’ but toward *manifoldness*.”¹⁷² God and World still maintain their conceptual difference. Faber here quotes Whitehead, “God and the World stand over against each other, expressing the final metaphysical truth that appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in creation. But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God.”¹⁷³ All creatures become together and God and world become in ecological relatedness and mutual enjoyment together as

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 95.

¹⁷² Ibid., 96.

¹⁷³ Ibid. Quoted in.

well. In this intra-activity, God and world work differently and interact differently. “In this mutual relationship, only *functional* differences are mentioned, no substantial dualities. Whatever can be said about God or the world must be said about all sides (against dualism) without equality (against monism) but differentiated in modes of diversity.”¹⁷⁴ God and the world unfold as mutually immanent occurrence, maintain manifold differences, and press forward.

Finally, Faber argues that, “God and the world necessarily (not by any fate but by the destiny of *being* ecological!) become ‘the instrument of novelty for the other.’”¹⁷⁵ God and world interplay to produce new experiences, possibilities, and events in the flow of everyday ecological life, each “become *mutual environments of one another*—of course, by way of any number of nested, non-linear and undetermined levels and spheres of mutually immanent environments.”¹⁷⁶ Novelty emerges throughout the manifold interrelations of the ecology of God and world.

These three interrelated points lead to, again, what Faber calls “ecotheosis.” The ecological relationships of God and world, “in the circle of love, *insists on an ecoprocess of multiplication* as what could be called the *salvation of the manifold*.”¹⁷⁷ Faber takes a Whiteheadian phrase, the “Apotheosis of the World,” to be a riff on Eastern Orthodox Christian accounts of theosis. As Faber interprets Whitehead, “mutual immanence constitutes a twofold, strictly ecological process transformation: ‘the transmutation of that temporal actuality into a living, ever-present fact in God’s nature and a transformation of Gods ‘nature itself [that] passes into the temporal world according to its gradation of relevance to the various concrescent

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 96-7.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 97,

¹⁷⁶ Ibid..

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 102.

occasions.”¹⁷⁸ Or, “the mutual transformation of the world into God and its Divine transformation flowing back into the world for its most intense multiplication.”¹⁷⁹ The temporal events of the world flow into Divinity and Divinity flows back into the world for the sake of intensity and harmony. As cosmological process and an intellectual practice, ecotheosis continuously blurs the lines of dualisms for the sake of theophanic multiplicity, asking us to reflect on our manifold contexts and the manifold ecoprocesses we move in and create.

Whereas Eriugena’s theophanic and apophatic panentheism makes a kind of manifold mutual immanence possible, in the *Periphyseon* that mutual immanence is still asymmetrical. God as nonsubstantialist Nothing exceeds and dwells within and as each and every mystical creaturely depth. But what Faber’s exposition of Whitehead might show is that each and every creaturely depth also inheres in the creativity of Divinity and the if theophany names the divine mutuality towards creation, then Faber presses the apophatic insight in Eriugena to be a mutual recognition of relations of difference. Perhaps Eriugena’s Divine Nihil can then be recognized as a species of apophatic transpantheism.

Epiphany as Sacramental Attention

Whereas Roland Faber’s ecoprocess construction of theophany offers a cosmopolitical view of how divinity works in the creative process, I also argue that *epiphany* is a corollary concept of creaturely en-corporation of divinity into everyday life. Irish philosopher Richard Kearney gives a distinctive place to the idea of epiphany in his *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. In *Anatheism*, Kearney attempts to think about divinity *ana-theos*, a time after a concept of God has been destroyed, lost, rendered useless, “In short, another way of returning to

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

a God beyond or beneath the God we thought we possessed.”¹⁸⁰ Thinking alongside literary texts and poststructuralist theory, Kearney wants to offer up the possibility for the transformation of the concept of “God” in the midst of everyday life beyond the certainties that define many of the assumptions about belief or divinity held by theists and atheists alike.

Anatheism, as a space between, attempts to describe the process of what happens after a certain conception of God falls away, and Anatheism is what emerges in the wake as a process of hermeneutic interpretation, deconstruction, and reinterpretation. Kearney writes, “Ana-theism: another word for another way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove.”¹⁸¹ Kearney offers anatheism as a kind of poetics of possibility, change, and the endless reinterpretation and wager belief in a certain conception of the Divine can be.

Kearney’s anatheism reaches back to an earlier project of “possibilizing” God in *The God Who May Be*. Throughout that book, Kearney looks to epiphanic and transfiguring moments in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures to navigate the rocky terrain regarding ontological claims of God’s presence or absence. To do so, Kearney, too, turns to Moses and the prophets, looking at the scene of the burning bush in Exodus 3 and the God that announces God’s name there. “My ultimate suggestion,” he writes, “is that we might do better to reinterpret the Transfiguring God of Exodus 3 neither as ‘I who am’ nor as ‘I who am not’ but rather as ‘I am who may be’—that is, as the possibility to be...a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future.”¹⁸² What Moses discovers in the

¹⁸⁰ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010: .3

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001: 22. Kearney imagines the Moses scene on page 21: “But it’s not

epiphanic and theophanic fire of the burning bush is none other than a God who commits to creaturely possibility. The theophany embedded in the burning bush is implicitly tied to Moses' just actions. "Yahweh is to be experienced as a saving-enabling-promising God, a God whose performance will bear out his pledges."¹⁸³ Divinity becomes a transfiguring relationship, empowering and luring forth liberation in the actions of Moses and becoming a God of liberation in the very actions of Moses. With language akin to process thought, Kearney concludes, "God may henceforth be recognized as someone who *becomes with us...*"¹⁸⁴ Epiphanies—from the burning bush, to the transfiguration of Jesus, Divine love in the Song of Songs—open up, often in disorienting moments, ways to reimagine God and enact that imagination in the flesh.

Epiphanies like those treated in *The God Who May Be*, become all the more vital as Kearney begins to sketch out anatheism as a middle way between hard-line theisms and atheisms. Moses finds himself considering past and future when he finds himself on the strange newness of Holy Ground. He reconsiders what he knows in memory and what he hopes to be true. He reinterprets tradition and his mind works the stories over and over again. Kearney would describe this anatheistic moment as an ongoing pattern of interpretation. He writes, "A new and surprising divinity that comes all the way back, in an instant, to where we were without knowing it. Eternity in the epiphany of each moment. Repeating, recalling, returning, again and

enough for Moses. Standing there under the midday sun, he wonders if this is not some mirage, some hoax. Perhaps the voice is an inner demon prompting him to a fit of madness. After all, wasn't it just such a strange angel who appeared to Jacob late one night and shattered his hip, before disclosing the name of Israel? And wasn't it another elusive voice which summoned Abraham to Mount Moriah to murder his own son? That was a cruel command. A trick of course. Only a test of faith. He must tread carefully. Moses wasn't quite sure he wanted to do business with such a mercurial God: one who sent visitors to maim you in the middle of the night and commanded blood sacrifice (even if he wasn't really serious). Every angel was terrible in a way, wasn't it? Moses longed for a God of justice and liberty."

¹⁸³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

again.”¹⁸⁵ The epiphany of each moment, or possible epiphanic spin, works itself and reworks itself time and time again in the memory, imagination, and sense of the human creature.

Kearney imagines the epiphanic event, the moment, broadly and deeply. “The anatheist moment is one available to anyone who experiences instants of deep disorientation, doubt, or dread, when we are no longer sure exactly who we are or where we are going.”¹⁸⁶ Theophanies and epiphanies occur precisely in the midst of vulnerability, loss, heartbreak, disorientation, failure, joy, love, pain, celebration, and wonder. And while Kearney does not explicitly reflect on ecological contexts to any great degree, I would argue that such moments are not limited to the human animal. Kearney continues, “Anatheist moments are experienced in our bones—moods, affects, senses, emotions—before they are theoretically interrogated by our minds.”¹⁸⁷ The whole experience opens us up before we can fully talk about them.

I might imagine this experience in terms of the tough new planet, in terms of climate change. The vast emotional or “gut” reactions to climate science are often pre-theorized—denial, despair, loss, hope. Global warming itself may present one of those moments of “deep disorientation” that, in all of its complexity, evokes the need for new conceptualities of God and the earth. And my writing here, as all writing could be none other than calls and performances responding to these wondrous, awful moments. We find ourselves called to reweave our cosmologies, Divinities, sense of humanity and ecology.

Kearney, given his poststructuralist leanings, does not want to gesture toward any cosmological directions or pursue apophatic metaphysics. Yet alongside like Eriugena or Faber, Kearney does find epiphanic experience a moment that opens one’s interpretation of our

¹⁸⁵ Kearney, *Anatheism.*, 5.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

relations, cosmic and local. “We find it in various moments of creative ‘not knowing’ that mark a break with ingrained habits of thought and open up novel possibilities of meaning.”¹⁸⁸ Kearney’s emphasis offers me the chance to weave his articulation of the *cultural* experience of epiphany into a manifold apophatic cosmology. Hermeneutics might show itself then as a cosmological and ecoprocess exercise of encounter as well. To borrow Kearney’s own language, “What we discover in such encounters is, of course, a practice of infinite modulation. Moments of epiphany are always embedded in the conditions of culture and always require representation and reading.”¹⁸⁹ Divinity upwelling from ecological place, I would argue, engages our processes of cultural and political interrogation and reimagination.

As a cultural-political exercise, Kearney finds the core of anatheism to be about two things: (1) discerning hospitality in encounters with strangers and (2) sacramental attention. “Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don’t choose, to call God.”¹⁹⁰ Strangers emerge as enigmatic Divine Others, friends, enemies, collaborators, potential kin, and how we think about engaging with those strangers is part of the process. The moment of confusion, unrecognizable divinity challenges our conceptions of accepted theology, story, or doctrine. With Eriugena I’d call this the Divine Nihil that unsettles mainstream theological vision. Kearney continues that, “the scene of the Stranger is at the core of the anatheist wager that concerns us here, even if this epiphanic moment of awakening is often neglected in official

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 7

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 7

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 7

theologies.”¹⁹¹ Epiphany is a profoundly polydox moment of where deep interrelations, transfigurations, and calls to justice or newness emerge.

Attentiveness to epiphanic moments is a process of responding to and cultivating postures of openness to wonder and interrogation of terrible newness. Kearney argues that each epiphanic moment is a moment of potential hospitality to the stranger. He writes, “You can kill the alien as a threatening enemy or overcome the initial fear and respond with a gesture of welcome.”¹⁹² Phrasing it like this, for our current ecological concern: One can close oneself off from gazing at the beauty of the vulnerable moment, one can tame wonder, one can see our ecological context as a stranger to know so as to use for unlimited anthropocentric abuse. Or, we can welcome and attend to our ecological contexts, attend to their interactions, think wisely about human ecological interaction.

Anatheistic attention to our contexts help cultivate a self “that fosters radical attentiveness to the stranger as portal to the sacred.”¹⁹³ We might encounter the stranger as sacred and cultivate empathy for the stranger’s plight or situation. We begin to feel “epiphanic love flaring up in the darkness of suspicion.”¹⁹⁴ We begin to open up our perception to the mystery of Divinity in the stranger, in the epiphanic other. Welcome to the stranger becomes a kind of transpantheism itself, to borrow Faber’s phrase. Kearney writes, “Love of the guest becomes love of God. The cut comes, once more, in this crucial and ultimate choice: to welcome or repudiate the *hospes*...Theophany as the guest become host.”¹⁹⁵ We enter into contexts of discerning reciprocity and mutual understanding. As Kearney continues, “For empathy to

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 37.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 29. And “*hospes*” on page 38

become sympathy—that is, feeling *with* the other as though one was the other—an act of imagination is called for.”¹⁹⁶ And while Kearney’s writing focuses on human others, I argue that this conviviality of feeling with the *ecological* other is of paramount importance.

Welcome to the stranger evokes for Kearney, secondly, a practice of imaginative and sacramental attention to our epiphanic contexts—to encounter epiphanic others and to reflect on their relations honors their manifold differences. Rather than imagining that we own the stranger or comprehend them completely, we respect their apophatic difference and honor the mystery of ourselves meeting the mystery of others. “Poetics, in short, makes us strangers to the earth so that we may dwell more sacramentally upon it.”¹⁹⁷ We pay attention to the tragic and beautiful vulnerabilities of the planet in order to welcome others and act with political empathy. We see the divine embodied in the flesh of the earth.

Like Eriugena and Faber, Kearney is keen to make epiphany a theological core of interaction with the divine. He prefers “epiphany” to “theophany” as epiphanic interactions host a wide range of new interpretations and ecological interactions—possibly Divine, but not necessarily. He writes, “These embodiments of the sacred I call epiphanies...such epiphanies are not confined to official religions but are found in both literary and everyday experiences of sacramental imagination.”¹⁹⁸ Epiphanies run in official theologies to everyday literature to heterodox to polydox religiosity. But, at the end of the day, Kearney is advocating for, “a sacramental return to the holiness of the everyday.”¹⁹⁹ The everyday is precisely where human attention, empowerment, and creative transformation occur.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 85.

Sacramental attention to the everyday, as a practice, falls with the prophetic and ethical concerns that Faber raises above. “Anatheism draws from these two vocations, seeking to combine the pilgrim commitment to protest and prophecy with a sacramental return to epiphanies of the everyday. It endeavors to balance the journey outward with a sojourning in the sacred here and now.”²⁰⁰ We learn how to navigate our migrations, movements, and circulations together in this planet—creaturely, energy, material, aesthetic, and political—moment to moment. This mutually immanent sense of possible Divinity is “a retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary.”²⁰¹ And to make that extra/ordinary possibility possible, Kearney desires to “sketch a sacramental aesthetics that illustrates how dying to an acosmic God may allow a God of cosmic epiphanies to be reborn.”²⁰² Divinity’s immanence must come through in the flesh of this earth, in the everyday, and in so doing might evoke new movements for care and justice.

To illustrate sacramental attention to epiphany, Kearney turns to unlikely allies. In agnostic writers like James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf, Kearney finds “the consecration of ordinary moments of flesh and blood *thisness* as something strange and enduring. These acts of transfiguration, which follow Joyce [Kearney] calls epiphanies, transpire in an embodied space and time far from the otherworldliness of metaphysical forms.”²⁰³ As we have seen, certain forms of metaphysics in Eriugena and Faber might allow for such embodied space, but creative transformation and transfiguration become important features of how epiphanies function.

As Kearney figures it, “epiphanies,” refer to “acts of textual ‘repetition,’ whereby the author treats a remembered event as both past (separated by time) and present (regained

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 85-6.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 86.

²⁰² Ibid., 98-9.

²⁰³ Ibid., 103.

miraculously in the epiphany of the moment).”²⁰⁴ We tell stories of our past experiences, repeat striking occurrences, and contemplate moments or interactions that we can’t shake. I might call this, along with Faber, the “in-sistence” of Divinity. And those interactions are remembered and the lessons we continue to learn from them are made and remade in the present. Epiphanies become akin to living parables, transfiguring our sense of deep time and future, “the conversion of an ordinary secular moment (*chronos*) into sacred time (*kairos*). Epiphany happens in the gaps, in the breaks of linear temporality when an eternal now....explodes the continuum of history.”²⁰⁵

Epiphanic reflection embodies a triadic structure. Kearney argues that, firstly, “prefiguring” lived experience serves as the basis for memories and the stories that emerge. Secondly, textual actors, style, mode of story, “configure” the text as a space of interaction. Finally, readers “refigures the world of the text” by embodying new experience.²⁰⁶ Authors, actors, and readers all contribute agency to the transformations emergent from these encounters. They hold memory forth and anticipate change and possible resilience in new situations.

What we’ve encountered is what Kearney argues is a “sacramental aesthetic” where “eucharistic imagination...is generously extended to acts of quotidian experience where the infinite traverses the infinitesimal.”²⁰⁷ Holding this everyday sacramental aesthetic in mind might be a way one receives the togetherness of creation and is transformed and transformed by it. And if we hold fast to mutuality in Divinity and earth, we might say that Divinity is entangled in the earth epiphanically, and is struck by the wonder of the planet (“this is very good,” the Priestly Genesis story says). Divine love is transformed from instant to instant as the ongoing

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 105.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 109.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 102.

creativity of life brings forth new creatures and possibilities, all bearing divinity in their own ways.

Epiphanic Earth

Thinking convivially with these three magi in the intellectual history of theophany begins to fabulate a relationship of divinity and earth where, cosmologically, the mystery of Divine life pervades and responds, creatively lures and is transformed, from moment to moment. Through these thinkers, “theophany” becomes conceptual kin that allows me to speculatively fabulate a new cosmological vision of resilience. It is the glistening and beautiful darkness of Divinity in every creature and every manifold relation that we call “earth” that becomes a new space of encounter and beckons further response. Creaturely relations, as I shall claim in the chapters to come, become epiphanies for one another, transfiguring expectations about life, relationships of food, energy, time, and atmospheric power.

We should note here that epiphanies themselves are not always “good” per se. Global warming, species extinction, loss, waste, the bleaching of coral, can all become possible sites of epiphanic interactivity, where we see profoundly the complex entanglements of life and death, tragedy and beauty, material agency beyond human control, systems that exceed us. God, Joyce once suggested, is a shout in the street.²⁰⁸

Yet the cry of the earth, the manifold, the injustices that wrap themselves in seen and unseen ways around the earth might also become turning points, memories that urge thought about the complexity of the earth and as the earth. One might tell stories differently of animal activists who, like Aldo Leopold, saw the fierce green fire in the eye of a dying wolf and were

²⁰⁸ As found in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

urged to act in tragic beauty. One might see activists like Jane Goodall watching chimps as those very chimps seem to experience something akin to wonder. One might stand with the water protectors at Standing Rock, protecting the sacred as it swirls in water and urges resistance against eco-colonial dispositions. We might hear the oft-quoted “pale blue dot” of Carl Sagan as an epiphanic call to cherish the infinitesimal manifold of the world. We might recognize in the manifold epiphanic interactions of earth that those epiphanies exceed human experience in ways we will never fully comprehend.

This chapter attempts to show how a theophanic earth may offer a different perspective on the dualistic One of classical omnipotent Divinity and the passive, uniform creation focused on the human. Theophanies flow out as manifold creation, and that manifold creation, in turn, creates God. The relationship is an earthy grounding of divinity where ecoprocesses include the creative transformation and interactions of a manifold Divinity and a manifold earth. Imagining the creative mystery of that manifold entails an apophatic cosmology where no creature is instrumentalizable, and mystery looks to mystery, deep cries to deep, cries of earth, stranger, divine, poor, outcast, climate refugee demand empathy and transfiguring passion for justice. “Let my people go...” Moses learned to say, recognizing the holy of the ground and setting out in the wake of the burning bush.

Eriugena, Faber, and Kearney each offer their own routes in thinking theophany, but this chapter looked to a lesser known possible history—Eriugena’s theophanic creation—as way to rethink Divine and creaturely relationality. I then turned to Faber to frame Eriugena’s theophany with a non-anthropocentric ecoprocess vision of mutuality. Ecotheosis, in-sistence and polyphilia, bring Divine love for creation into the manifold and begins to sketch a form of ethics. With that cosmological vision, Kearney, even despite his reticence to engage in metaphysical

work, offers us a way to interpret the complex hermeneutics of epiphany experienced in the everyday. Epiphanies that open us up to the strange, new planet we live on and epiphanies that courageously lure us to make possible different creaturely relations in the present are precisely what we need in the wake.

With this epiphanic earth in mind, we turn to the transfigurations of imagination and resilience that might be possible (or might be made possible). Chapter Three now turns to how epiphanic attention might be part and parcel of what are being called the New Materialisms. These non-theological voices offer perspectives on matter critique common figurations of matter as “dead,” “passive,” or to be exploited. Material agencies that deconstruct the human/nonhuman divide and epiphanic moments in new materialist scholarship reconstruct material agency in ways that help us see the geophysical workings of our planet. If Divinity makes and is made by all, we must find ways of acknowledging our geophysical, material life together and aspirationally looking for new, convivial ways of living together. The theophanic conviviality of Divinity with earth, manifold creaturely lives with each other, demands a kind of collaboration and kinship. After all, at the end of the day, Moses didn’t go to Egypt alone. Aaron spoke words Moses stammered through. Miriam offered prophetic action, words and singing. And the fire of Sinai ignited new passions they never thought possible. Holy ground, indeed.

“Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated.”

- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*²⁰⁹

“At Standing Rock, between the ones armed with water cannons and the ones armed with prayer, exist two different languages for the world, and that is where the battle lines are being drawn. Do we treat the earth as if ki is our relative—as if the earth were animated by being—with reciprocity and reverence, or as stuff that we may treat with or without respect, as we choose?”

- Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Speaking of Nature”²¹⁰

Prelude to a Theophanic Animacy

Global warming calls for different understandings of the spiritual and material energetic flows of the earth. In my first chapter I argued that theology must undertake a process of speculative fabulation in order to construct a “theopoetics of the earth” or an “eartheology” that rethinks the material possibilities of divinity on a tough new planet. Alongside a number of vital ecotheological voices and themes, I argued that theological concepts must get “dirty” in ways

²⁰⁹ Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010: 12-13.

²¹⁰ Robin Wall Kimmerer, “Speaking of Nature” *Orion Magazine*. Online: <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/> Published: March/April 2017.

that might make possible new postures toward the earth. Indeed, such postures might make a way possible through the extremes of environmental despair and practical environmental apathy that capture our ecological imaginations day in and day out.

In Chapter Two, I turned to one possible geo-lineage for constructing that story—the concepts of “theophany” and “epiphany.” Stories of divine theophanies and epiphanies appear in biblical texts and in the history of Christian thought, from the Hebrew Bible to Gregory of Nyssa and beyond. And, as we see in more contemporary writers, “theophany” and “epiphany” sometimes become speculative theological concepts themselves—from Eriugena’s concept of a theophanic creation to Roland Faber transpantheistic theophany to Richard Kearney’s atheistic epiphany. Thinking with these writers, I argued that theophany works both as a concept for a speculative, fabulative construction of an epiphanic earth. Theophanic creativity urges, in my estimation, a vision of the earth as alive with divinity. As Alfred K. Siewers writes,

More than anything else the *Periphyseon* arguably sought to shape textually a restoration of Eden-like wonder on earth, a wonder related to realizing the significance of larger contexts of life in the sparkle of divine energies in nature, and of desert-style listening and obedience in obligation to them as part of being human.

Wonder that opens attentiveness and obligation, then, trains one’s sense, reason, affect, and imagination to feel the agency of nonhuman life. As an energy and practice, this attentiveness entangles and exposes the shared materiality of human and nonhuman.. Practices of wondrous attentiveness can unmake a human sense of sovereign ownership over creation, leading one to recognize the relatedness of all creation in divine creativity, the manifest way other creaturely relations can mystify our senses of self-understanding, and the ethical obligations theophanic relations (like the Burning Bush) might make upon human lives.

Theophania, as this study constructs it, is precisely a speculative-fabulative energy that unsettles all-to-human perspectives of place and planet. That energy lures the human creature to view all creatures in a matrix of epiphanic divinity, as creatures entangled in the creative and anarchic energy of God. Concepts of theophany, as we might glean from Eriugena, serve as a kind of re-attunement to vibrations and animation of nonhuman landscape and nonhuman creatures. In shifting our attentiveness to the divine creativity as theophany, we also begin to discover something of an animate world, an *anima mundi*. Divinity flows into the matrix of relations of human-nonhuman phenomena, exposing their wonders and bringing attention to their devastations.

This attunement of theophany, I argue in this chapter, is necessary for reconsiderations of our environmental history, epistemological attentiveness to contemporary political ecologies, and transforms the very language we employ for our nonhuman kin. A speculative, fabulative epiphanic theopoetics of earth in creation asks us to consider our attentiveness as a practice and strategy of climatological adaptation and resilience. In doing so, this chapter particularly finds inspiration in the new materialisms and new animisms of Kath Weston, Lynn White, Jr., Jane Bennett, Mel Chen, and Robin Wall Kimmerer. Each one of these theorists while working on their own (often nontheistic) projects gives a new perspective on materiality in a way that I might consider “epiphanic” here. Weston offers a historical locating of new animisms as what happens when material configurations “break down.” White, as part of his “thesis” already explored in Chapter 1, urges a new kind of Christian animism. Bennett reconsiders a cultivation of attentiveness, an epistemology that attunes itself to the captivating agency of matter. Chen expands those configurations to consider intersectional materialisms in race, class, sexuality, and

disability. Finally, Robin Wall Kimmerer takes these moments and offers the possibilities for fabulation, again, as she asks us to consider the “grammar of animacy.”

These strands offer a vision of a common and yet animatedly manifold materiality. If earth is an animated world, these thinkers help us articulate more profoundly what kind of earth transforms our theology and what kind of earth is “made by” and “makes” divinity. Weaving these strands together, I argue that theophany be developed not just as a theology of divine creativity, but a way of reconsidering our “epiphanic kin”—divine and creaturely—in the Anthropocene. These kin relate to each other prismatically, each refracting and lifting up new kaleidoscopic or even riotous, carnivalesque visions for ethics on this planet. Topsy-turvy as this planet is, to think about such things requires changes in patterns of material observation and feeling.

**“When it Dissolves,” or “Swish, Crackle, Fizz”:
Epiphany of a Planet Breaking Down**

Over the last few decades, philosophers, political scientists, and anthropologists (among others), have turned to think about varieties of anthropocentric imagination in a riotous world. The human-centered valuation of power and instrumentalization of nonhuman life saturates religious thinking, humanist values, and capitalist economic exchanges across system. To tackle the fundamental problem of anthropocentrism, the value, agency, and consideration to nonhuman powers is reimagined in the present. Ecocritics and theorists often reimagine the place of the human and the vitality and agency of nonhuman forces in conversation with contemporary political ecology.²¹¹

²¹¹ Some of these scholarly voices and movements take on less ecological perspectives. Speculative realism and Object Oriented Ontology, for example, casts a metaphysical net

Interesting to note, however, is that rather than a re-attuned sense of the glory of creation, our eco-philosophical attitudes emerge from the wake of environmental devastation and global warming itself. Because the very systems we live in crumble around and in us, because patterns of imagination no longer work in the manners by which they used to, we find ourselves not just reimagining the planet or telling different theological stories of the planet out of benevolence, but we do so by necessity, in the ruins of a former façade.

The anthropologist Kath Weston takes the crumbling of this façade as her primary consideration in her *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World*.²¹² In a way, Weston's scholarship exemplifies a different kind of storytelling in the Anthropocene that Haraway or Serres and others might find crucial. Her book opens with familiar lines, "*Long ago but not so far away...*"²¹³ Weston begins her book with a strange bedtime story, one that sounds like a story told to children, the stuff of dreams. She continues, "*the creatures of earth depended on one another, and they knew it. It was the Age of Intimacy, the Era of Connection, an Anthropocene in which Relation had not yet birthed Alienation, its shadowy twin.*"²¹⁴ She tells a story of an almost primordial utopia, where intimacy and relation remain a time of humans where devastation is not unleashed over the planet.

The story quickly disintegrates into that alienation: "*until the winds of Capital had laid the old ways bare.*"²¹⁵ In this story, ecological and economical concepts take on an almost

broad, but, with the exception of Timothy Morton, doesn't explicitly riff on ecocriticism to any great extent.

²¹² Kath Weston, *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

mythic or allegorical stature, functioning as actors themselves. The story continues where the “lords and lieges” devoted to Capital, to the accumulation of wealth, become secluded and distant from the ecological materials that uphold their lifestyles and livelihoods. That separation, or numbness of attention, takes hold and planetary ecologies dwindle and become forgotten remnants.

The winds of this story shift again and rumblings of discontent begin to emerge. New inquiries into living differently with the planet catch on. *“They built temples of commerce to new gods called Sustainability and Resilience (whom they imagined to be old), tried catching rainwater in barrels, rediscovered how their grandmothers had brightened winter days by turning jars crimson with tomatoes”* An emergence of an ecological moment transforms daily living, slowly. In Weston’s story, a shifting polytheism exists – the old gods of growth and Capital slowly wane to new myths of resilience and ecological living.

Weston tells the story as a bedtime story, but the story is in fact the story (or at least a story particularized for a specific group of people) of Western Modernity. The narrative revisits us like the ghosts of planet past, present, and future. “Like the best bedtime stories,” Weston writes, “modernity’s tale directs the sleepy listener’s attention to an elsewhere.”²¹⁶ Indeed, Weston is concerned here that modernity’s tilt to the story already puts us at a kind of disadvantage. If ecological intimacy and animacy were “good” in some kind of primordial past and recovery of those ancient attitudes needed for some kind of utopian future, we dare not look at the kind of animate relations happening in our wounded present.

Imagining a pristine past, for Weston, constitutes a dangerous romanticism, indeed. And attempting to rehabilitate the concept of theophany from, say, a ninth century mystic might be

²¹⁶ Ibid.

considered exactly that kind of misdirection. The point, however, is telling those stories, speculatively unfolding **in** the present **for** the present.

And that's what Weston does, precisely. Other stories, alternative, subterranean, dare we say subaltern, exist in the alterities of this arching modern story. She writes, "New animisms and new intimacies thread their way through these alternate stories, as humans come to terms with both the injury they daily inflict in the name of 'advance' and the transformation of their very bodies through biotechnology, industrialized food production, and synthetic chemistry."²¹⁷ In the wake of the naturecultures of the Anthropocene, in moments of breaking down, technological production, contemporary haecceities and aggregates, unique identities and complex configurations, the animations of materiality and of non/human ecologies can become all too evident.

In the midst the break down, Weston's project is not immediately a recovery of some lost form of animism, endowing trees with souls and rights (though, I might argue when we come to Kimmerer's work below, those "old" animisms may contribute more than could be imagined).²¹⁸ New animisms or "animacies" attempt different configurations of attention. "Instead, they remake the world with the conviction that animacy renders trees and humans and rocks and cows inseparable, not only in the sense that each acts upon the others in ways that may or may not be deliberate but also in the sense that each takes up something lively from the others that

²¹⁷ Ibid.,

²¹⁸ There are moments in the text where Weston uses the language of traditional animisms and new animisms interchangeably, however: "In a reanimated world inscribed by harsh histories such as these, the backstory to a bowl of lamb stew can never be properly recounted through some agricultural traceback project. Nonhuman people (to use a more indigenous vocabulary) or agents (to use the secularized language of the new materialities) would need to be consulted..." Ibid., 195.

contributes to its very form.”²¹⁹ The inseparability and entangled relationality, even intra-active relationality, between things and creatures is the real concern of the new animisms. New animists for Weston, in their diversity, look for the exposed animations of relationality in everyday life (and nonlife, we might say). She continues, “collectively they represent an intimate, emergent, mutually constitutive version of a world infused with life, down to the pavement caressed by our feet as we walk down the road and the exiled wildflowers finding a way back to the sun through crevices of asphalt.”²²⁰ Animation, relation, and the uncovering of animate intimacies occur in the Anthropocene in unexpected places, from guerrilla gardening to scattered seeds, from geological histories to buildings built of rock.

Weston argues that rather than looking to traditional animisms or attempting to cultivate an epistemological project (like Bennett will, for instance), *Animate Planet* attempts to look at the “animating and reanimating is an efflorescent, historically located process.”²²¹ Rather than claiming philosophizing outright, Weston looks into case studies of present, intimate tensions to explore the nonseparability of creatures and that mutually constitutive version of life. Her location as an anthropologist, her stories of modernity, and her presentist sensibilities open up this vision much more strongly to the reader.

Yet Weston’s writing does convey an epistemological desire to know the present differently. In that way, her storytelling might urge new experiments in presentist and expansive ways of knowing. The animations of “intimacy” in her writing might serve as a guidepost to such thought. Intimacy is, she writes, “a heuristic that can be helpful for getting at some of the ways in which people try to make creative sense of tensions between all that technology

²¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²²⁰ Ibid., 5

²²¹ Ibid.

promises and the way they keep looking over their shoulders at an ecological deterioration, if not devastation that seems to be gaining ground.”²²² Planetary intimacy is a way in which we attempt to grapple with mass extinctions, atmospheric changes, sea level rise, and fragile community devastations precisely at a time where humans feel technologically optimistic about their chances at “fixing” environmental problems.

The feelings of intimacy are creative, tense, affective and swirl within bodies at the levels of personal emotion and at the levels of communal, politically affective energy. To use Weston’s word, they are “visceral” and we take notice when something breaks down or a conceptual location no longer makes sense. She observes, “lately there are other sounds that have something to do with the swish, crackle, fizz a boundary makes when it dissolves.”²²³ That “swish, crackle, fizz” is where we tune into animate relations. The onomatopoeia of those words express what can be inexpressible—the wonder and terror of our present moment.

Swish, crackle, fizz. The everyday burning bushes of creation entangle themselves with divine creativity and the darkness of Divinity flows in league with them. Swish, crackle, fizz. Divinity moves in technology and creature alike, pulsing in the relations and tensions. Swish, crackle, fizz. The bushes, in their wonder, demand new ways of seeing the world or prefiguring the one that is to come. Moses is sent back to Egypt to dismantle a system of slavery and environmental catastrophe on the scale of Empire. The swish, crackle, fizz anticipates exodus into uncertain difference.

We might consider the animate affects of moments like these as Weston does: “It is, if you will, the sound of intimacy as it works upon the material world, though not perhaps intimacy as conventionally conceived. It is the sound of people trying to make visceral and political sense

²²² *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

of the damaged ecologies that late capitalism has bequeathed them, in the shadow of the promise and the peril that high technology represents.”²²⁴ We are not romantically intimate, personally intimate, or even sometimes intentionally intimate with these contexts and fellow planetary travellers. Instead, intimacy is about negotiation, resilience, the attempts at understanding that try, that fail, that succeed, that work on the body without realization.

Weston’s unnamed epistemology calls out for an attentiveness to the animations of planetary intimacy in the wake of damage. Yet her own writing as an anthropologist attempts thick, historically complex descriptions to eke these out. Her chapters interrogate food, energy, climate, and water with historical processes and locations in mind. But it’s her writing on climate change that simultaneously proves both relevant to my discussions here and also illuminates, animates we could say, her understanding of the workings of planetary animacy and intimacy in the wake of global warming.

In her chapter “Climate Change, Slippery on the Skin,” Weston attempts to explore an often overlooked perspective on what we would call “climate denial” or “climate skepticism.” Much of the scholarship on climate denial focuses on the ultraconservative Christian-capitalist denial of global warming for various reasons. Such denials are important not only because of their prevalence, but for the key ranking American political officials who live out those ideals in their political work.²²⁵ (Indeed, such perspectives seem to be actually shrinking, with most uncertainty that global warming is human-induced).²²⁶

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ We might consider Scott Pruitt’s tenure as head of the Environmental Protection Agency under the Trump Administration or the radical global warming denying work of Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma.

²²⁶ One example, see the 2014 study on religion and climate change, *Believers, Sympathizers, and Skeptics Why Americans are Conflicted about Climate Change, Environmental Policy, and Science* by Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones for PRRI.

Rather than focusing on the political denials of global warming for conservative theological reasoning or religious belief, Weston hones in on an undercurrent scientific history of the body. “Long before climate change skepticism appeared on the North American scene, long before the fossil fuel industry paid lobbyists to spin credible research on environmental damage into ‘junk science,’ people like my aunt Elsie were accustomed to consulting their bodies in order to decode shifts in both weather and climate.”²²⁷ Aunt Elsie can tell if the rain is coming depending on feelings “in her bones,” gauging the atmosphere, observing daily patterns as “highly skilled readers of corporeal signs.”²²⁸

The complex interaction between the fields of what we label “climate” and “weather” is fraught and tense territory. Frequently, climate denial makes its arguments on observational, empirical weather patterns. “How could global warming be happening,” a denier might say, “given the amount of snow we had this year?” Or, when weather seems colder or than usual, the moniker “global warming” doesn’t seamlessly connect with what some people claim to experience on a day-to-day basis.

Of course, much climate denial takes on explicitly theological reasoning: God offers creation as a gift, and there’s no way human beings could destroy God’s creation. Or, God will create a new heaven and a new earth and, therefore, whether climatological change to creaturely detriment is irrelevant anyway; God isn’t planning on using this creation as a final word in any case. What Weston observes is an argument that may not be explicitly theologically articulated, but instead roots itself in empirical human experience and entangles itself with both scientific and theological worldviews. As Weston argues,

<https://www.prii.org/research/believers-sympathizers-skeptics-americans-conflicted-climate-change-environmental-policy-science/>

²²⁷ Weston, 105.

²²⁸ Ibid., 106.

On closer inspection, however, the appeal to bodies to evaluate predictions of ecological catastrophe made a certain kind of cultural, historical, and *scientific* sense. Discussions of climate science that enlisted sweat (or the lack thereof) as evidence drew upon the time-honored, culturally situated practice of waking up, searching for that bit of breeze against the forehead, and not finding it, announcing, “It’s going to be a hot one!”²²⁹

Human beings have, since time immemorial, used their body for the sake of scientific measurement. Length is measured by “feet” or “cubits” measured by arm length. “Feeling” out the weather is yet another way to measure or observationally take stock of the world around us without modern scientific tools.

With the emergence of contemporary scientific measurement, the role of the body for measuring or observational science becomes far less important. And yet the shadow of that practice of empirical, even “scientific,” measurement of the world lingers, haunts contemporary imaginations. Weston asks, “Could it be that at least some strands of climate change skepticism in North America owe their inspiration to science, rather than being hostile to scientific analysis?”²³⁰ Climate skeptics, who evaluate the validity of global warming from their own embodied observation of local weather pattern, because they neglect to see the slower violence of climate change, can’t verify what the more established scientific community is trying to say. Weston continues, “The point is this: people who use eyes, wrists, and perspiration to search out evidence of changing climatic conditions may not always be ‘confusing’ weather with climate so much as puzzling out the relationship between the two.”²³¹ Climate denial, in some strands whether they are theological or secular (and it’s important to note that Weston does not consider this perspective on climate denial to be universal) might, in fact, be the result of a lingering desire to confirm the new planetary situation with older forms of scientific measurement.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid., 121

Embodied forms of empiricism don't necessarily "see" the kinds of projections that CO2 measurements and Keeling Curves might be able to expose. Weston concludes, "The embodied empiricists accused of climate change denial could equally well be credited with *refusing to succumb* to denial, in the sense that they have refused to deny the evidence of their senses when encouraged to take climate model projections on trust."²³² A version of empiricism, in this case, is trying to verify another version of scientific observation. So, too, might we characterize certain kinds of theologies as attempting to cope and "refusing to succumb" to the idea that a good and sovereign God would let creation run haywire.

Here is the "Swish Crackle Fizz" of a boundary negotiating itself, strained under the weight of a new context, and attempting to see the animated realities between our embodied experience, local weather patterns, and vast strains of atmospheric science. Whereas an older form of training our senses to see the animated world came from our embodied senses, newer forms also, now, include the vast technological unfoldings since the scientific revolution. In some ways, our body memory is still catching up to the changes in observation of the stunningly unruly materiality of the planet. How do we animate our concepts of experience, embodiment, nonhuman agency of weather, and patterns of atmosphere and climate? How can we reach across geologic time with our imaginations? How can we train our senses today to envision a planet riotous and beautiful with animated resiliency?

Again, how do we do new work for the sake of resilience? Weston only begins to suggest an animating of professional scientific relationships with localized citizen scientists (or those who test things out with their bodies so). Weston believes that creative alliances that simultaneously record local, embodied observation and perception paired with education on new

²³² Ibid., 125.

strategies for recording climate change could come into play. “Like other forms of citizen science, embodied empiricism could serve as a tool that complements rather than competes with existing lines of research.”²³³ How might citizen scientists contribute to the observed and empirical data about place and planet in ways that complement contemporary research?

Weston asks the question in a way that refuses the zero-sum game of professional versus lay scientists. “What would it take to organize the scattered empirical *observations* of North American climate change skeptics into an empirical *investigation* that could subject truth claims about climate change to the test of the senses without necessarily rejecting the body’s value as a scientific instrument or finding those senses wanting?”²³⁴ We might, I suggest, not have to look too far to find good examples. We might find a model in contemporary practices of environmental history, where the recorded data of species from animals to birds to plants, weather, patterns, and so called natural disasters are recorded by citizen observers and begin to correlate with new scientific investigation into geophysical history of the planet. The journals of Henry David Thoreau, for example, combine naturalist observation in such a way that gives us a contemporary picture of an environmental history of something like Walden Pond or New England more generally.²³⁵

In a sense, what Weston is asking us to do is rather than engage in a process of romanticizing ecological relations, we are to animate the strange relations and histories of our moment in order to see where breakdowns and difficulties occur. This new form of animism demands we take human and nonhuman bodies and histories into account, that we think about

²³³ Ibid., 129.

²³⁴ Ibid., 130.

²³⁵ Andrea Wulf, “Walden Wasn’t Thoreau’s Masterpiece.” *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/what-thoreau-saw/540615/> Published: November 2017.

our histories of interaction and the sedimented layers of political affect that accumulate in society. Weston asks us to consider the complexities of planetary intimacy and what is animated in those odd spaces such that we might consider, like she does with climate change, new ways of forming alliances and of cultivating resilience in the present moment.

“A Mood of Indifference”: Revisiting the White Thesis

Weston’s argument for exploring intimate animacy and the complexities of animating intimacy may serve us well in religion and ecology. Her attention to the boundaries being unmade in real contexts shaped by and shaping material histories is almost acoustically apophatic: Swish, Crackle, Fizz are sounds of mystery frothing up from the chaotic depths of a systems. Swish, Crackle, Fizz is the sounds of creative new possibilities and reconstitutions of creative planetary intimacy. She is not the first to argue for new forms of animism and, indeed, the argument for a new or counter-history of animism might be considered a foundational argument for the history of ecotheology and religion and ecology.

Weston contrasts her approach with approaches that attempt a decentering of the human, but a classical argument from the history of ecotheology could easily be making these frothy sounds of animacy as well. And, in fact, the most canonical piece in Christian ecotheology *does* hinge around dissolving boundaries alongside both what gets called the “old animism” and the riotous material ontologies of the “new animisms.”

As already noted in Chapter 1, the publication of Lynn White, Jr.’s thesis in 1967 evoked an energy field that coalesced into an academic field of “Religion and Ecology” or ecotheology. White’s concern in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” can be read as a presentist question, like Weston’s: how do we attend to the ecological devastations of a breaking down

modernity in the here and now. What visceral ideas and tensions might emerge if we attentiveness to theological ideas was practiced widely? White's academic contribution is much richer and expansive than solely the thesis in "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." His writing long focused upon intersection of animality, technology, machinery, and history. And number of scholars like Matthew Riley are pointing us towards these rich possibilities in White's thought beyond this article.²³⁶ Yet staying with this article for the moment, "Historical Roots" serves as a kind of founding myth for ecotheology and its imaginative outlines—a prism constantly surfacing new possibilities.

White's argument resonates strongly with scholarship on the Anthropocene. He argues, "All forms of life modify their contexts."²³⁷ Human beings manipulate and transform terrains and contexts, just as the rest of the creaturely world does. Immediately, White observes the first intuitions of the Anthropocene—planetary human transformation, and particularly one where biotic communities are disregarded, used, and abused by humans. Or, as Weston might ask, how do we see ourselves simultaneously in the midst of rapidly developing technological paradigms and the ecologically damaged world we find ourselves in.

Essentially White asks into the historical geo-genealogy of contemporary attitudes of disregard—and, mid-60s, asks this question amidst a whole host of growing concerns and consciousness with the modern environmental movement. If humankind can transform the planet, and does so to planetary devastation, where does that "ecologic" or ecological storytelling come from? "Especially in its Western form," White writes, "Christianity is the most

²³⁶ See, as just one example, Matthew Riley's essay "A Spiritual Democracy of All God's Creatures: Ecotheology and the Animals of Lynn White, Jr." in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*. Ed. Stephen Moore. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014.

²³⁷ Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" *Science*, New Series, Vol. 155, No. 3767. (Mar. 10, 1967). p. 1203.

anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen.”²³⁸ Human beings, in the Yahwist creation narrative, are created in the image of God, to have dominion and subdue the earth. That itself locates a centralization of value in the human being. When such an idea reaches and comingles with the rapidly developing agricultural context of the middle ages, White argues, ecological contexts lose. Ideas that license control alongside unprecedented powers to control spin out across Western imaginaries and lives. Western science, in a number of secular theological ways, emerges from Christian theological discourse. White is doing political theology well before political theology is in vogue. He was making visceral sense of the ecologic crisis with theology and spirituality in mind.

While White finds anthropocentric and self-centered attitudes in the *imago Dei*, this idea, on its own, is not *entirely* culpable. A number of biblical critics of the White thesis object that dominion means simply survival and a garden-like creativity in a hostile and arid environment.²³⁹

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1205.

²³⁹ Richard Bauckham, for instance, registers some concern here that the bible is being “misread” and Pope Francis, in *Laudato si’* says that this version of dominion isn’t “really” Christian, but instead a form of “misguided anthropocentrism.” I have my doubts about this critique not because it is wrong or right, but because, like scholars of the historical Jesus quest, these reconfigurations of dominion as “stewardship” smack to me of a kind of retrojection or self-projection in the desire that scriptural texts remain unmuddled. I hold a number of critiques of the White thesis, but I generally think White identified a very powerful, influential and dangerous popular use of biblical language. In her history of elephants, Susan Nance notes that 19th and 20th century menageries often advertised animals in captivity as an exercise in human dominion. More recently, conservative politicians like Jim Inhofe or Rick Santorum have used the language of dominion to argue for the unlimited use of natural resources. I’d note to these scholars that “dominion” language doesn’t play much for biblical writers at all, really only featuring in a couple of places, Genesis, Proverb 8, or places like Psalm 72 that talk about “kingly” dominion. The best single, general piece on the Bible and Ecology from an ecocritical perspective remains Holmes Rolston III’s “The Bible and Ecology” *Interpretation: Journal of Bible and Theology*. 50:1996. On page 17 he writes that, “Perhaps the biblical writers did not know how the heavens go, but they did know how the earth goes—not at planetary ranges, nor in soil chemistries—but at the pragmatic ranges of the sower who sows, waits for the seed to grow, and reaps the harvest.” That is, they held a kind of embodied empiricism that might look more like Weston’s sketched lineage of climate skepticism.

We are, of course, fifty years in the wake of that thesis, and much of White's original treatment has been debated or criticized. Conservatives think he overstated his case and misread biblical texts, either in that they believe anthropocentric attitudes are licensed (the neocon argument) or they attempt to blame not Christian thought but the emergence of Modern Industrialized logic or the pervasiveness of ecological damage in global religious and philosophical traditions as well. While I do think the biblical writers in all of their manifold diversity might not be solely to blame for this ecologic, I might agree with White's conclusion that a peculiar form of Christian Anthropocentrism plays a significant role.

I'm re-examining White's argument at this juncture not for his (in)famous critique, but for his "solution." Most commentators on the "White Thesis" focus on the indictment of anthropocentrism, only a few focus on his ecologically religious solution, and even fewer focus on his rich attentiveness to animistic perspectives in theology. Where he faults anthropocentric notions of transcendence, White also indicts the loss of material animisms that exhibit the value of nonhuman lives and agencies. He notes, perhaps overly general, but not without import, that,

In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated."²⁴⁰

Nonhuman locations, creatures, and elements embodied or conveyed notions of an animated world, where human beings must work in collaboration with those forces to maintain a sense of just exchange. These animated kin populated myths and stories but at the same time honed one's attention to interactions with place. White argues that, "By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural

²⁴⁰ White, 1205.

objects.”²⁴¹ Visceral attitudes of superiority entwine with moods of indifference to produce a lethal ecologic and ecoaffective cocktail. He continues, “To a Christian a tree can be no more than a physical fact. The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and the ethos of the West.”²⁴² This de-animated world centralizes animation in the image of Adamic dominion, the *imago Dei*, and sets humans to till the garden without much regard for the vitality of the elements or agencies of the nonhuman creatures alive there.

White concludes his infamous article with an urgent appeal for lifting a counter-history of Christian theology, that of the 13th century Saint Francis of Assisi, who seems to maintain a kind of animate world, even in spite of Western Christianity’s drive towards mechanized dominion. Francis’ view of nature “rested on a unique form of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator, who, in the ultimate gesture of cosmic humility, assumed flesh, lay helpless in a manger, and hung dying on a scaffold.”²⁴³ All things take on a panpsychical reality, having mind or agency, regardless of their status of animate life. In this way, a form of re-animation takes place in Christian theology where nonhuman life is acknowledged to have agency outside of the human. The Saint cultivates a kind of awareness of that metaphysics in hymns, sermons and stories.

White argues that something akin to Francis’ sense of the “spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction.”²⁴⁴ Or, we might say with Weston that the argument attends to yet another dissolution—the dissolution of the embodied values of Christianity resonating with medieval and modern agricultural industrialization. The sounds heard there expose an animate world regardless of human kind’s own presuppositions. At the same time, White, long before the

²⁴¹ White, 1205.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 1206.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1207.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1207

ones of our present moment, called for a new animism that might help remedy Christian forms of hubris.

Interestingly enough, White confines his own personal critique to dominant Western forms of Christianity, and very explicitly excludes certain Eastern forms of Christian theology. He speculates that Eastern forms of Christianity, with different “tonality” might have escaped that anthropocentric violent drive—through its concern with illuminating truth rather than right or moral action emphasized in Western Christian theology. Ecology or Nature becomes the complex locale of divine and creaturely communication, a matrix of interaction. White oversimplifies here a bit as well, but, he writes, “In the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men: the ant is a sermon to sluggards; rising flames are the symbol of the soul’s aspiration. This view of nature was essentially artistic rather than scientific.”²⁴⁵ Rather than an aggregation of power with an instrumentalization of creaturely kin, because of the artistic communication (whether divine or not) that ecological life can bear, a different posture or awareness might be in play here. A sense of divine theophanies could be considered an odd juncture here, a conjunction of Latin counterhistories (so much so that he was accused of pantheism, as Francis might have) alongside Eastern perspectives on the *theoria physike*, as outlined in the last chapter, the contemplation of the energies of Divinity in theophany. Because of his placement between Eastern apophasis and Western Latinate Christianity, Eriugena’s sense of theophanic creativity might issue a critique that plays with porous boundaries of so-called “Eastern” and “Western” Christianities. Or, White might see in these forms of Christianity a kind of new animist direction itself, a direction that attends to difference and different agencies, in the midst of an overwhelming Western mood.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, 1206.

“Shimmer and Spark”: Attuning to Theophanic Materiality

What would it mean to attend philosophically or theologically not just to the moments of collapse, but also cultivate a positive attentiveness to nonanthropocentric senses of agency? Scholars like Weston and White, in their own contexts, point out the emergence of and importance of reanimating animacy in the midst of large systems of collapse. But scholars like Jane Bennett and Mel Y. Chen attend to the positive epistemological and linguistic construction of new materialism and new animism in remarkably helpful ways.

White’s critique, of course, helpfully exposes the material dualisms haunting certain forms of Western Christianity and the secular societies entangled with them in their wake. Matter is passive, dead, to be shaped by human kind created in the image of a transcendent Creator God. The cosmos serves as the background and backyard for infinite human experimentation.

Jane Bennett and other scholars of the “new materialisms” ask how we might reconfigure conceptions of matter and reset our attention to matter in ways that both critique harmful anthropocentrism and expose anthropocentrism as a false story of reality. Animate materialities always exceed the human and those materialities in complex “thing-power” and aggregate agencies continually disrupt our expectations. As Bennett offers, “my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption.”²⁴⁶ Like White, Bennett sees the anthropocentric problem for what it is.

²⁴⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010: ix.

But in her important *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Bennett wants to go further than White's directional gesture offers. She argues that images of dead or passive matter feed these impulses, "by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even 'respect.'"²⁴⁷ Imagining matter in certain ways actually blocks our sensual attention to nonhuman powers and agencies.

Bennett instead argues that in order to attune ourselves sensually to the animate, which she calls "vibrant," materialities around and in human life, we must cultivate sets of attentiveness that answer the "call" of things. She, too, starts with a kind of break down, an attentiveness to debris. Debris, of course, manifests a *mélange* of the human and nonhuman. She is walking and describes the singularity of an event: "On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was..."²⁴⁸ Bennett begins with the specificity and singularity of experience, an experience that opens up what she calls "thing-power," the strange ability of things to exhibit their agency and own "energetic vitality." She caught a "glimpse" of that energetic vitality, "When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark..."²⁴⁹ Bennett's description takes on a different tone and trajectory than Weston's here. That shimmer and spark is not necessarily the shimmering or spark of a boundary dissolving *per se*, but rather the shimmer and spark of relations compelling attention in their strangeness.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5

Out of that event, Bennett dedicates her work unpacking a vibrant materiality, thinking with matter, to the trajectory of “*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”²⁵⁰ Dramatic effects like her encounter with debris compel different trajectories of attention in political ecologies, then, the ways that “things” can affect legal or political arrangements or produce unexpected effects in assemblages of agencies. Matter, minerals, animal bodies, energy, inorganic bodies and organic ones, material compositions of food, etc. all contribute to, influence, or grate against how humans interact in the world.

This observation that materiality matters and can upend the negatives of human hubris is not simply a critique of anthropocentrism; she also desires to redefine human materiality all the way to its core. She urges, “But the case for matter as active needs also to readjust the status of human actants: not by denying humanity’s awesome, awful powers, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality.”²⁵¹ Human beings must recognize their own materiality and the vast constitutions that assemble into their constitutions.

Mel Y. Chen takes the language of vibrant materiality and animacy into those vast constitutions of language, sex, gender, race, disability, and intersectionalities in her book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. For Chen, the concept of “animacy,” especially as found in linguistics offers a way to think about relations beyond a binary of “life” (active) and “death” (passive) that often reinforces the idea of matter as dead, passive, and usable. Chen asks, “how matter that is considered insensate, immobile, or otherwise

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 10.

‘wrong’ animates cultural life in important ways.”²⁵² Or, as she puts it more concretely, “What if nonhuman animals, or humans stereotyped as passive, such as people with cognitive or physical disabilities, enter the calculus of animacy: what happens then?”²⁵³

Chen answers her question by exposing what she calls “animacy hierarchies” in linguistics (a concept originally proposed by Michael Silverstein) and the ways in which “de-animation” of people, creatures, and matter happens in linguistics. Linguistically, in one form, “This schema asserts that an adult male who is ‘free’ (as opposed to enslaved), able-bodied, and with intact linguistic capacities, one who is also familiar, individual, and positioned nearby, stands at the top of the hierarchy as the most ‘animate’ or active agent within grammars of ordering.”²⁵⁴ Linguistically, declaring matter as “passive” or “dead” here implicates vast and complex systems of socio-political ordering. Certain forms of human become the most animate and carry the most capacity and most value to act in the world. Instead of seeing the world in terms of complex political assemblages of actors, animacy hierarchies filter power into everyday patterns of imagining, speech, and create assumptions about relationship and capacity that enshrine social orders. Political leaders call groups of people “animals” precisely as a way of attempting to strip them of their animate agency, de-humanize, and objectify those they desire power over.

Accretions of certain animacy hierarchies also seek to maintain status quos in the material flows of climate change. Chen provides the example of the September 19, 2010, oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In the wake of the spill, popular responses consisted of claims to a “way of life” were threatened. Rather than concern for the ecological ramifications of the spill

²⁵² Mel Y. Chen. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012: 2.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 27

because of the animacy of the Gulf in and of itself, people appealed to life as a way of articulating recovery for the sole purpose of economic livelihood. In effect, the arguments made wanted to clean up to maintain an already failed system instead of think about the new ecology they found themselves in. “More often than not,” Chen notes, “articulations of the oil’s danger, or the oil dispersant’s toxicity (untested at such quantities), to sea creatures were made not for their sake but for the purpose of identifying a risk to an economic source of ‘livelihood’ for the human professional residents...”²⁵⁵ The well itself, as a new kind of deep drilling rig posed no real problem—the economic system in place needed to maintain itself.

Chen observes that certain concepts like “life” and “death,” “dirtiness” and “cleanliness” all became animated in the wake of the spill to maintain those economic values. She writes, “a toxic spill was a *lifely* thing: lifely, perhaps, beyond its proper bounds. The well itself was alive, and not only because something had flowed out of it with such vivid animation. It was a threat to life in the Gulf, as well as a *way* of life.”²⁵⁶ The concept of life, as Chen argues, is coopted by a powerful economic system to embolden privilege and hide especially the nonhuman victims of ecological violence.

Importantly, however, is the slipperiness of animacy, where matter and language can be animated and reclaimed in ways that subvert anthropocentric, racist, sexist, and ableist hierarchies. Asking how to rejoin to these, or construct new forms of animacy is of deep concern to Chen, and she explores the way this reclamation can happen. Specifically, the notion of “queer” as a linguistic talking back reanimates the possibilities that terms flattened out in animacy hierarchies can insist themselves singularly or collectively, “call” as Bennett might say, back to upend expectations on what should be animated and not.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 224

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 227

Other strategies exist as well. Epistemologically, Bennett suggests a number of plays of mind to go about cultivating such ethical attention to vital materiality. She takes a cue from Theodor Adorno's "negative dialectics." Adorno suggests a parallel set of techniques for opening up thought and attention. Such techniques include "intellectual as well as aesthetic exercises" that press open our concepts and recognize the inadequacy of much human theorizing, utopian imagining, and play or "clowning" around to risk the nonlinear, collaborative, responsive, ironic theorizing that often in carnivalesque ways turns theorizing on its head.²⁵⁷

While Bennett sets up this serious practice of play in a nontheistic manner, we might also find important resonance with negative theologies, mysticisms and ecological spiritualities that press against our concepts of creation and Divinity. Techniques produced by "negative dialectics" or "vibrant materialism" may have an "affinity with negative theology"²⁵⁸ even while Bennett asserts that, "A vital materialism is more thoroughly nontheistic in presentation: the out-side has no messianic promise."²⁵⁹ But, Bennett continues, they "nevertheless share an urge to cultivate a more careful attentiveness to the out-side."²⁶⁰ Careful attentiveness to a kind of reality which "withdraws" or, I would argue, carries a kind of negative depth, is precisely a resonant path in vibrant materialism for apophatic theology. Chen invokes the words of cognitive linguist Mutsumi Yamamoto on animacy in similar veins:

Yamamoto shifts away from analyzing data to appeal to the language of mysticism: "it is of significant interest to linguists to capture the extra-linguistic framework of the animacy concept, because, as it were, this concept *is a spell which strongly influences our mind* in the process of language use and a keystone which draws together miscellaneous structural and pragmatic factors across a wide range of languages in the world."²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Bennett., 13-4

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 16-17,

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

²⁶¹ Quoted in Chen, 9.

The spell of an apophatic animacy or materialism that calls for our attention, that recognizes multiple agencies, suddenly begins to look like a theophanic creature or epiphanic space of possibility. And so, even while projects like Bennett's and Chen's are "nontheistic in presentation," I might collaborate with their insights into vibrant materiality to construct a certain kind, if odd kind, of theistic presentation of the same.

As noted in the previous chapter, while animate theologians and meditations of divinity flow to materiality for brief moments, the omnipotence and oneness of ephemeral divinity trumps the divine-earthen manifold.²⁶² Still, theophanic thought points towards the energy of divinity as it flows in material places, of divine energy occurring in and as material place in ways that glow with luminous darkness at its edges. With theophanic attention to divine energy we might begin to reconstruct earth and divinity as irreducibly entangled and animated, animated in its moments of breaking down, animated as a vast animate planet bursting with agency, creaturely and divine. According to Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett, "it makes sense to view energy as material and spiritual at the same time rather than to dualistically oppose them."²⁶³ Or, to think of the occurrence of divinity with the occurrence of matter-energy as well, we might think of energy as Catherine Keller does, "with possibly more fidelity both to science and to the spirit of our shared life—as the rhythm of interactivity." To think divine and matter-energy as pulsing to a rhythm of interactivity is to think about them as vulnerable and resilient together, simultaneously. Keller continues, "Energy signifies the pulsation of life: life as boundless vitality, life that exceeds the distinction between organic and inorganic. In theological

²⁶² Part of this section emerged from my piece "Theophanic Materiality: Political Ecology, Inhuman Touch, and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy" in *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science and New Materialisms*. Ed. Catherine Keller and Mary-Jane Rubenstein. New York: Fordham University Press, 2017:

²⁶³ "Introduction" *Cosmology, Ecology, and the Energy of God*. Ed. Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

terms, energy connotes not only the efforts of work but the effortlessness of grace as well.”²⁶⁴ This rhythm calls back to the forms of transpantheistic self-creation we advocated earlier. Divinity engaged in an anarchic reciprocity and theophanic multiplicity might offer a deeply material divinity, making and made.

“The Grammar of Animacy”: Sensing and Speaking Epiphanic Kin

How do we live and speak in that rhythm of intraactivity? Paying attention to the dissolution of boundaries, the call of thing-power, the animacies that slip through day to day takes attentiveness to the mystical side of life. But it also involves cultivating entangled new and old habits of mind. The botanist and Potawatomi writer Robin Kimmerer writes that, “Linguistic imperialism has always been a tool of colonization, meant to obliterate history and the visibility of people who were displaced along with their languages.”²⁶⁵ In the West we live and speak in the haunting histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism where animate materialisms were so often discarded or regulated for the expansion of Western anthropocentrism. The hauntingness of deanimated languages and landscapes continues in the present in unseen ways.

Kimmerer argues that we need to reclaim a “grammar of animacy” and practice that grammar daily. In her own practice, Kimmerer attempts to learn and innovate the Potawatomi language that is her heritage. The language itself thinks about animacy and, like many indigenous traditions, refers to nonhuman creatures as “persons” with subjectivities. Kimmerer

²⁶⁴ Catherine Keller, “The Energy We Are: A Meditation in Seven Pulsations” *Cosmology, Ecology, and the Energy of God*. Ed. Donna Bowman and Clayton Crockett. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012: 12.

²⁶⁵ See also Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013. I will be focusing here, however, on: Robin Kimmerer, “Speaking of Nature” *Orion Magazine*. Online: <https://orionmagazine.org/article/speaking-of-nature/> Published: March/April 2017.

acknowledges that thinking about animacy in language doesn't necessarily imply positive ethical action or interaction, but language does "reveal unconscious cultural assumptions and exerts some influence over patterns of thought."²⁶⁶

The patterns of thought Kimmerer finds so inspiring or playful re-acknowledge the animate personhood of nonhuman creatures and matters. "Living beings are referred to as subjects, never as objects, and personhood is extended to all who breathe and some who don't. I greet the silent boulder people with the same respect as I do the talkative chickadees."²⁶⁷ Kimmerer marvels at language and its history—the language of personhood flies right in the face of an imperial logic that views materiality as passive or without agency. One might see Kimmerer's language of personhood as naïve or, worse, one could coopt that language ourselves as a romanticization of indigenous lives. But we need to acknowledge that these languages of personhood are just as slippery as languages of animacy themselves, historically and linguistically.

In his important study of animism, Graham Harvey argues that we must imagine animist perspectives in the fullness of their contemporary diversity. "Animism" as a claim is often viewed as "premodern" or "primitive," and in many narratives (including White's) is something transcended, conquered, or sublimated by and into modern rationalist or Western Christian thought. But for Harvey, animism is a continually alive and haunting force that never disappears in the supposed enlightened eras of modernity or postmodernity. Animism is "vitaly present," and Harvey seeks "a way to speak of and to celebrate all that we are as embodied, sensual,

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

participative persons in a physical, sensuous, relational world and cosmos.”²⁶⁸ Indeed, this project shares this inquisitive venture and relational cosmos.

For Harvey, this seeking leads to his now classic definition: “Animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others.”²⁶⁹ Kimmerer’s worldview and language falls right in line with this world “full of persons” and that fullness redirects attention and relationship in different ways. So much so that she wants to think about an “expression that could be slipped into the English language in place of *it* when we are speaking of living beings.”²⁷⁰ Kimmerer wants to play with, offer new possibilities of linguistic play and attention to English speakers. Note that she’s not asking for White Europeans to take up indigenous practices or worldview, but take up instead habits of mind.

Kimmerer discovers a word in Potawatomi that resonates with her habits deeply. She asks her teacher and “*Aakibmaadiziiwin*,” he said. Or, “a being of the earth.” Recognizing the word is not an easy one to bear, she writes, “With full recognition and celebration of its Potawatomi roots, might we hear a new pronoun at the beginning of the word, from the ‘aaki’ part that means land? *Ki* to signify a being of the living earth. Not *he* or *she*, but *ki*.”²⁷¹ And Kimmerer takes this wordplay one step further, *kin* for plural, such that birds and rocks can be referred to as *ki* in ordinary language. Her words are not exactly the language of personhood, humanly conceived, but they do open up a strangeness, dare I say an epiphany, in language that opens up differential regard to different materialities, agencies, and all of their relations.

²⁶⁸ Graham. Harvey. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. London: Wakefield Press, 2005: xxvii.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

²⁷⁰ Kimmerer.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

This epiphany of language for Kimmerer may have political consequences. She thinks about the water protectors at the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. For her, this kind of language is not purely linguistic, but materially practiced. “The river is not an *it* for them—the river lies within their circle of moral responsibility and compassion and so they protect *ki* fiercely, as if the river were their relative, because *ki* is.”²⁷² This reimagined language speaks deeply to the political context of the water protectors. “Water is life. Water is sacred.”—*Mni wičoni* or *Mni Ki Wakan* in Lakota.

Attending to the strange beauty and otherness of relation, Kimmerer knows that this sounds naïve—“dreaming up pronouns.” But perhaps this dream is the kind of storytelling and play that Weston or Bennett might imagine. I might dream here, too. Kimmerer’s linguistic plays are just one example, but we might think of other negative practices that I might consider practice of epiphanic attention. Epiphany in language and relation. Indeed, if we begin to attend to the creaturely and material world around us and within us in these new ways, theologically we might be able to call our animated relations *epiphanic kin*, divinely-material relations that deserve our respect and lure us to respond to calls in kind (I’ll turn to the political obligations of this respect more in Chapter 5).

Kimmerer offers a new way of conceiving language as a relative, and I’ll gladly hear her call to strange openings of material animacy. If the theophany traditions tell us of an illuminated planet crackling with divinity, that planet animates and illuminates in co-creative glory. Breakdowns show us the places where facades of power reveal their instabilities and receptivity to the world. Calls for new animisms ask us to reconsider the practiced assumption and attention we apply animacies to our kin, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic in the world.

²⁷² Ibid.

Attentiveness both surprises us and asks us to pay attention to the crackles, the shimmers that fill our daily lives, from our relations to our own divine bodies to the bodies of others. The shimmer and spark makes epiphanic attention sound like an utterly beautiful practice, filled with ecological wonder and joy, but as we'll see in Chapter 4, beauty in the Anthropocene does not look like what we expect. Like Moses, each burning bush asks us to acknowledge its holy ground, demanding respect and responsibility. What we see may take our breath away. And it might reduce us to tears.

“Joy burst forth through the pervading gloom like life determined to prevail. Life was in the eye of that gull that, despite imminent death, maintained its own fierce gaze. Life was in the pelican struggling to lift its oil-drenched wings and fly. Life was in the people you kept hearing about in the news, reaching beyond their desperation to help others. I, by committing to the gaze, became both part of the predicament and part of life’s tenacious drive to hold on as long and fiercely as possible.”

- Trebbe Johnson, “Gaze Even Here”²⁷³

“To name God ‘tragic beauty,’ to identify God with the beauty of the earth, has to do with our own practice of moving empathetically through pain toward renewed love of the earth with eyes wide open.”

- Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*²⁷⁴

Writing, that is, Singing Wide-Eyed in the Wake

The planet groans under the weight of the “slow violence” of global warming, to borrow Rob Nixon’s phrase.²⁷⁵ Breakdowns and changes occur, but they often do so imperceptibly. And yet these slow wounds affectively churn our guts. This violence wounds human and nonhuman lives, wounds the geology of the planet and devastates the spirits of all that dwell and

²⁷³ Trebbe Johnson, “Gaze Even Here” *Orion Magazine*. November/December 2012: 67-70.

²⁷⁴ Sharon V. Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh*. New York: Fordham Press, 2014: 66.

²⁷⁵ Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

migrate together over the curve of the earth. Hearts break, mouths remain parched, hunger abounds, animals and plants live labored lives, and species tumble down in trophic cascade and extinctions.²⁷⁶ The privileged wound themselves by imagining their relative safety. Refugees multiply. The litany is painful to sense, to touch, to sight, to the imagination, and you may feel the lament in your stomach every time someone brings up the reality of global warming.

Or, perhaps, global warming has slowly taken so much from you that you can't see the loss at all. Our imaginations span despondency to denial. *Swish, Crackle, Fizz*. This oscillating is the double bind of our current moment: we're losing what we never knew in the first place from unknown species to poorly understood atmospheric energies, and we are silent, both compelled and unable to articulate planetary loss. Our very bodies rend apart in the invisible destitution of our relations. We call it the Anthropocene, and that word's resonance feels coldly (or warmingly) human. We live in the ongoing wake of the technological power of human beings, and that power's transformed quickly into an ongoing planetary wake.

In the wake of this loss, this tragedy, and this devastation, I remain fiercely aware of the limits of my writing. Philosophical conceptuality seems more inadequate than ever. The old hymns and songs my great-grandmother used to sing of walking through the garden do not bear the weight of hope and glory they once did in my heart. Theology cringes. My writing has forgotten itself in the flesh of the planet; my capacity to write with hope or possibility is undone. I no longer know how to write as I once did, to sing for the beauty of the earth. How might I begin, again?

Environmental poet and Buddhist thinker Joanna Macy articulated this loss acutely already in the 1990s. In her 1995 article, "Working Through Environmental Despair," that we

²⁷⁶ On such changes or extinctions see, especially again, Bill McKibben's *Eaarth: Making Life on a Tough New Planet*. New York: Henry Holt, 2010.; Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt, 2014.

are feeling deeply the losses in navigating the scenery of the Anthropocene, “There is terror at the thought of the suffering in store for our loved ones and others. There is rage that we live our lives under the threat of so avoidable and meaningless an end to the human enterprise. There is guilt...there is sorrow.”²⁷⁷ The psychic realities, affects, and emotions flow and friction in body, mind, and community, weighing down those who consider ecological loss. Macy argues that we repress that pain, avert our senses from ecological destruction. Sight, taste, smell, touch, hearing, imagination, on and on, all avert themselves from considering ecology, environmental loss, ecological beauty, and ecological tragedy in real time. We do so because we feel overwhelmed, unable to bear the future, as a coping mechanism, or because we simply do not care.²⁷⁸

Yet those varieties of response, for Macy, signal something else: a relational compassion. She argues, “What we are really dealing with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: ‘suffering with’. It is the distress we feel in connection with the larger whole of which we are a part. It is our pain for the world.”²⁷⁹ For many who navigate an irrevocably warming world, pain for the world and aversion to that pain are responses to connection, relationality, and empathy. Unfortunately, we respond by refusing to see the messy realities, beauties, changes, tragedies, and transformations of the world, for good or ill. While a number of high profile climate change deniers maintain power in government positions, in reality most who wrestle with their planetary context find themselves in this nebulous middle—pressed with other problems, concerns of immediate social justice and safety, and the everyday forms of “practical relativism,”

²⁷⁷ Joanna Macy, “Working Through Environmental Despair” *Ecopsychology*. Eds. Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner. Sierra Club, 1995: 1.

²⁷⁸ See my classifications in my piece, “The Many Faces of Climate Denial” in *The Huffington Post*. Online: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/the-many-faces-of-climate-denial_us_5936683be4b0cca4f42d9d1a Published: June 6th, 2017.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

as Pope Francis has called it, that allow us to navigate our day without much attentiveness at all.²⁸⁰

Macy suggests that we might cultivate practices of openness to the world in new ways—taking hold of the “witness” of creatures, opening to the manifold. She writes, “Life systems evolve flexibility and intelligence, not by closing off from the environment and erecting walls of defense, but by opening ever wider to the currents of matter-energy and information. It is in this interaction that life systems grow, integrating and differentiating.”²⁸¹ Flexibility and adaptation happens through vulnerable feeling, integrity, and receptivity to difference. Quite often anthropocentric logic constructs an either-or or win-lose scenario. Instead, Macy sees this openness as solidarity, empathy, and resilience to complexity in the midst of chaos. She writes, “Here power, far from being identified with invulnerability requires just the opposite—openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change.”²⁸² Like Haraway argues that it is important to “stay with the trouble” of the Anthropocene, in order to feel resilience and collaborative kin, Macy argues that we need our epistemological, affective, and aesthetic attentions to stay with and open to feeling the pain of the political moment. Staying open to “wider flows of information, even when certain information seems inimical to our self-interest, where the needs of the whole, and other beings within that whole, are seen as commensurate with our own. Only then can we begin to think and act together.”²⁸³ I might say that Macy is arguing for what we should call aesthetic

²⁸⁰ See paragraph 122 of Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home*. Online: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html Published: May 24th, 2015. See also my piece, “Falling in Love with the Earth: Francis’ Faithful Ecology” *Religion Dispatches*. Online: <http://religiondispatches.org/falling-in-love-with-the-earth-francis-faithful-ecology/> Published: June 19th, 2015.

²⁸¹ Macy, 17.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 18.

and political empathy. Paying attention to our relations, information, and manifold creatureliness might help lure our attention and collaboration at just the right moments in time.

As such, Macy's understanding of "working through environmental despair" is intimately linked to the connections that attention can reveal and create. Collaborative power is "power as process" not "power over."²⁸⁴ As she writes, "'Power with' involves attentive openness to the surrounding physical and mental environment and alertness to our own and others' responses."²⁸⁵ It is the capacity to act in ways that increase the sum total of one's conscious participation in life."²⁸⁶ Our attention, in the fullness of that word, can open us to unexpected line of connections. Our attention reaches out to touch others in the complexity of the moment; we find ourselves touched and led into creating lines of surprising connection. Working through environmental despair is a process of attentive and collaborative creativity.

The ecojustice ethicist Larry Rasmussen asks, I think, a similar question: "How, then, do we hymn the Earth differently? How do we write and sing a new song for a strange land, even though it is our own? How do we do it with our neighbors, all our neighbors—human and the other-than-human—when Earth is 'hot flat and crowded' and borders and walls no longer protect?"²⁸⁷ He phrases the question in terms of emotion and beauty. What shape of theopoetics

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ A number of contemporary theologians—including some mentioned throughout this writing—are re-imagining theological conceptions of power. Anna Mercedes, for instance, constructs a relational Christology that utilizes *kenosis*, often conceived of as Christ's self-emptying or giving, as a not just a "power over" in domination or a "power with" in mutuality, but as a "power for" specific others as a form of resistance. I would argue that Macy's own understanding of "power with" allies nicely with Mercedes' "power for." See Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.

²⁸⁶ Macy, 1.

²⁸⁷ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key*. Oxford University Press, 2013: 5.

might seduce a kind of wide-eyed hope for the warming world in ways that neither despair nor deny?

In earlier chapters, I argued for a more nuanced reading of what we code as the “Anthropocene.” The term is, of course, more heterogeneous than often allowed for or written into theories. I opened by locating our contemporary discourses on ecological theology as they’ve imagined themselves from local stewardship of land into a complex planetarity. Our theology causes and is embedded in the wake of global warming, which means we must write and speculatively fabulate theology in new ways. We must now task theologies of ecojustice both with mitigating future harms as well as fostering resilient adaptation in our new situation. The challenge is to theologically pay attention to the apparatuses we use to interpret our context, and the models we use to construct adaptive resilience, survival, and possibility in new ways. In theology, theophany beckons our speculative imagination to rethink creation and the relationship of Divinity and earth. Paying attention to theophanies of divinity in and as earth open up new connections and understandings of creaturely kin.

In my last chapter, I argued that one of the stories that we could tell anew might be that of an epiphanic or theophanic creaturely materialism. I returned to argue that such a theophanic possibility illumines new *epistemological* understandings of planetary creativity, beckons our creaturely attention to the wounded places of the world, becomes a relational unfolding of a manifold creation in league with a divinity that goads anarchic creativity in multiplicity. Theophany, in new animist and aesthetic vibrancy, might be a way for contemporary theology to navigate planetary entanglements. I am working, slowly, here, collaborating artistically with materials to expand the fabulations and tellings of our ecological stories into the present. We might sing new songs into being.

My argument comes slowly in this writing because the words are so hard to form, so difficult to sing. My fragile utterance in this chapter now, for this moment, gestures that our contemporary theology and theopoetics must rethink how we imagine, pay attention to, and write the love of ecological beauty. The tragedy is that just as we slowly form the words, the warming planet accelerates the loss. A theopoetics of the earth is needed now, more than ever. We must re-key our attentiveness to the epiphanic multiplicity of the earth. As Stephen Jay Gould once urged, “we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love.”²⁸⁸ Despite the inevitabilities, now, of some of the effects of global warming—signified by a scientific shift to the language of adaptation instead of mitigation—that complicated love of beauty—still rings true in even more complicated ways. To work through environmental despair is to be attentive to Divine self-creation in the complex beauty of earthen and ecological processes.

Following in the textual paths of a number of contemporary ecological writers, especially that of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, I hope in this writing for a new kind of aesthetics to lure us along in the ecological trauma and catastrophe of our age. Piecing together the creative ecological aesthetics of writers like Trebbe Johnson, Terry Tempest Williams, and Nicole Seymour as well as theologians like Sharon Betcher and Shelly Rambo, I want to lure us toward an earthen theopoetics of tragic beauty, where our imaginative sense of aesthetics is deeply implicated in the tragedy of contemporary ecological life and, at the same time, complicatedly, ambiguously, bears the beauty of the resilient fragility of life. A constructive ecotheology must

²⁸⁸ Stephen Jay Gould. *Eight Little Piggies: Reflections in Natural History*. London: Vintage, 1993: 40.

be attentive to tragedy and resilience, catastrophe and resurgence, loss and survival. It must work *through* environmental despair. In short, a theo-poetics of the earth must also learn how to engage in an aesthetic process of lament and contemplation. “Epiphanic attentiveness” to that resilience and fragility of life might very well inspire a convivial ecological politics that can bear both resilient and resurgent acts of cosmopolitical love.

On the Possibility of Attending Beauty in Capitalist Ruins

The anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing offers ways for us to reconsider our contemporary fraught planet. In her remarkable chronicling of the cross-cultural and cross-planetary life in the wake of the devastations of global capitalism in the Anthropocene, Tsing asks a very ordinary and yet provocative question, “What do you do when your world starts to fall apart?” I might ask this question in a subtly different way: What do you do when your understanding of a beautiful world falls apart? Shrugs often abound, grief, or confusion as named above. But Tsing goes on to answer the question for herself: “I go for a walk, and if I’m really lucky, I find mushrooms.”²⁸⁹

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Tsing attempts to go about what she calls the “arts of noticing.” Like, Macy, Tsing desires to practice new kinds of attention. For “[n]either tales of progress nor of ruin tell us how to think about collaborative survival,” she writes.²⁹⁰ Instead, Tsing attempts to think through a third way via a constructive engagement with the strange ecologies and economies that make up the fungal movement of the matsutake mushroom in North America and Asia. In the wake of the

²⁸⁹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015: 1.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

Anthropocene, in all of its figurations, “collaborative survival” is precisely the way we “make a way out of no way,” as womanist theologians remind us, time and time again.

For Tsing, the arts of noticing or as she gives a wider umbrella term in a later collaborative volume, the “arts of living on a damaged planet,”²⁹¹ is to pay attention to the complexities of damage and resilience, economies outside of dominant capitalistic monocultures, serendipitous happenings, collaborations between human and nonhuman creatures attempting to live on, and the unexpected aftermath of loss. She writes, “To walk attentively through a forest, even a damaged one, is to be caught by the abundance of life: ancient and new; underfoot and reaching into the light.”²⁹² Mushrooms particularly in this case exemplify the movements of life as they grow and absorb elements from other creatures disturbed and decaying. Unlike modern Western forest rehabilitations that focus on “letting a forest return to the wild,” matsutake mushrooms depend on continuously disturbed forests for their growth and return. Human disturbance, sometimes unintentionally, causes new potentialities to show up.

Tsing asks of these potentialities in this way: “But how does one tell the life of the forest? We might begin by looking for drama and adventure beyond the activities of humans. Yet we are not used to reading stories without human heroes...Can I show landscape as the protagonist of an adventure in which humans are only one kind of participant?”²⁹³ To understand damage, we reconfigure stories to understand the human element and human articulations of value as only one actor in a number of networked relations. This insight, of course, is the fundamental insight about how we reconsider our place in the Anthropocene, but there is an

²⁹¹ Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 155.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

aesthetic kind of quality to that work and a demand for new modes of storytelling about what is good or beautiful. Tsing notes, “There are other ways of making worlds...we forget that collaborative survival requires cross-species coordinations. To enlarge what is possible, we need other kinds of stories—including adventures of landscapes.”²⁹⁴ We form collaborative survival strategies with earthly kin, and make worlds with them. Making worlds, of course, is precisely what *theopoiesis* purports to do.

But how does Tsing’s storytelling or even ecotheological storytelling articulate beauty in these coordinations? Is there a notion of beauty that might be uncovered and politically relevant for ecological work together. Tsing thinks that the metaphor of polyphonic attentiveness makes sense here. Anthropocentric capitalism demands mass productive monocultures, uniformity, and neglects difference in power grabs. But for Tsing, the kind of attentiveness needed is more subtle, sensual, almost tactile in its hearing: “In contrast to the unified harmonies and rhythms of rock, pop, or classical music, to appreciate polyphony one must listen both to the separate melody lines and their coming together in unexpected moments of harmony or dissonance.”²⁹⁵ Ecologies in the Anthropocene move, sometimes erratically between harmony and dissonance, and to practice an artful attention to those movements, to hear possibilities for collaboration relies on paying attention to the textures of both. Aesthetically, we need to be attentive to the complexities of damage and resilience, the rhythms and not a falsely perceived wholeness or perfection of ecology. To tell such stories of attention is to tell stories of rhythm and polyphonic engagement—of tragedy and possibility. Multiplicitous work demands complexity.

Tsing argues that we need a multifaceted and multidisciplinary approach for telling those stories. “Telling stories of landscape requires getting to know the inhabitants of the landscape,

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

human and not human. This is not easy, and it makes sense to me to use all the learning practices I can think of, including our combined forms of mindfulness, myths and tales, livelihood and practices, archives, scientific reports, and experiments.”²⁹⁶ Indeed, scholarly disciplines break down in this kind of storytelling. Or, rather, scholarly disciplines and genres learn new modes of collaboration for the possibility of noticing differently. Tsing concludes, “The new alliance I propose is based on commitments to observation and fieldwork—and what I call noticing. Human disturbed landscapes are ideal spaces for humanist and naturalist noticing. We need to know the histories humans have made in these places and the histories of nonhuman participants.”²⁹⁷ Human and nonhuman stories, fabulations, possibilities, attentions make new modes of knowing and being in the world. Tsing’s own project leads her not to look at the possibilities of an idealized utopian wilderness, but instead to pay attention to the subtleties of where she is, in a planet pervasively disturbed by human—especially White, Western, human—kind. We move forward without classically Western notions of capitalist progress, of the world getting better all the time.

Tsing’s sense of the arts of attention opens up for a tactile aesthetics: “Getting by without progress requires a good deal of feeling around with our hands.”²⁹⁸ Tactile aesthetics requires an intimate knowing and intimate, proximate politics of attention. That attention is richly important to knowing location and proximity, but it also touches upon the deep mysteries of the planet that exceed our understanding our field of vision. Planetary scientist Linda T. Elkins-Tanton puts it like this:

In a broad sense beauty is the reason we all do what we do, why we choose the field we choose, and what gives us determination to keep working in the face of discouragements.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

We do not choose to study the minerals in lava flows because it was an obvious career alternative to the law, we do it because lava is beautiful and the notion of interrogating the untouchable heart of the planet through incandescent molten eruptions appeals to our unconscious understanding of human relations and our place in them.²⁹⁹

That kind of storytelling without abstract progress might lead to a kind of political and relational touching, a seeking of mutual understanding for the common good. That kind of storytelling leads to certain forms of “adventure-in-process” as we discover new epiphanic and incandescent dimensions of ecologies we’ve never encountered before. In the wake of a damaged planet, Tsing might call this dimension the “latent commons”—the latent political space of common possibility and collaboration. Other scholars have referred to something resembling this illuminating space as the undercommons. Underneath it all, new ways of knowing, being, and living show forth. And we’ll turn chapter five to examining those theophanic commons of conviviality.

Polyphonic and Irreverent Attention to the Textures of the Earth

If Tsing offers new arts of attention for thinking anew of our location in the textures of the earth, my hunch is that writers and poets might be cultivating that kind of attention already. Collaborating our attention with that of theirs might be a form of uncovering the possibilities of beauty in these ravaged landscapes. In a 2012 piece in *Orion Magazine*, the writer Trebbe Johnson chronicles her trek into the clearcut forests of Washington State. In “Gaze Even Here: Opening Our Hearts to Brokenness” she describes the scene:

Rounds of massive trunks supply the only focal point for the eyes, while a tangle of ripped branches and limbs fill every conceivable space between them. All the way to the horizons the land has faded to gray. The place is not only dead, but mutilated. For

²⁹⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Linda T. Elkins-Tanton. *Earth*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017: 72.

several moments we stand there and allow ourselves to be hit, over and over, by the sight of it.”³⁰⁰

The scene washes over her like rough waves. It’s a devastating practice she undertakes, but that’s precisely the point. She desires something more attentive than usual. “Aversion is a natural response to bearing witness to something tragic,” she observes. Still, she continues, “According to Francis Ponge, the early-twentieth century French poet and chronicler of the mythic existence of ordinary things, we cannot truly see something until we allow it to ‘disarrange’ us.”³⁰¹ Working through environmental loss undoes our sense of self-certainty, stability, or isolation in the world.

Attention quite often undoes our normal arrangements and orders in the world. Such disarrangement occurs precisely because of the unruly agencies of materiality and the allure of theophanic divinity in place. We attend to the sparks and shimmers of the world and in our vulnerability they attend to us; sometimes they attend to us first. Because ordinary things hold power and agency in our lives, we see new configurations, patters, and potential affiliations in the world. There is something of a vibrant or vital materialism here— allowing oneself to recognize the agency of the quotidian, however difficult or painful. Indeed, this aesthetic disarrangement is precisely a practice of seeing the more tragic of daily life. Johnson notes that, “Poet Gary Snyder has expressed his desire for a new branch of ecology, one that would force us to consider the ‘dark side of nature—the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite’.” This is perhaps something resonant to what Timothy

³⁰⁰ Trebbe Johnson, “Gaze Even Here: Opening our hearts to brokenness” *Orion Magazine*, November/December 2012: 67.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Morton has called “dark ecology.”³⁰² But Johnson’s argument takes a somewhat unexpected turn in that she turns to implicate the human. “But the dark side of nature,” she notes, “must also include those species and places that have been darkened by the insatiable appetites of the human race.”³⁰³ Human beings, part of nature, cause of ecological devastation, global warming, practicing the uncomfortable ritual at gazing, spending time, holding back judgment, suspending aversion, observing the tragedy.

For Johnson, the practice is one with a kind of Buddhist sensibility to it, “sustaining the gaze,” she says, bypassing ordinary ways of seeing to “gaze at the human condition, taking in what is there in all its thorny complexity, while maintaining smooth openhearted compassion.”³⁰⁴ But she keeps her attentiveness attached to the particularity of what she sees. The experience of gazing Johnson undertakes and writes in its wake leads her to an unexpected appreciation or love of the particular energies of the place. She observes, “Gazing at the clearcut enabled an exchange between people and place. We brought our attention, curiosity, and openness to the place, and it, in turn, provided us with inspiration, compassion, and, yes, beauty. We discovered that what we had feared would be too painful to bear was not.” Her sustained practice of gazing at clearcut forests opened up a response in her, a recognition of human complicity and damage, and at the same time, an appreciation for the resilience and beauty of life and history there. It opens up her sense of complicity in and compassion for the place: “Gradually, by practicing the art of gazing,

³⁰² Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007; and his later *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

³⁰³ Johnson, *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

we got to know this broken forest. And then, so slowly we hardly recognized what was happening, we began to love the place. There is no other way to say this.”³⁰⁵

However strange, Johnson’s practice of aesthetic attention opens her up in a kind of love for the devastation of the clearing. She doesn’t romanticize the clearcut, detach from the human violence and tragedy of the experience; she connects deeper to that loss and the relation opens a kind complex experience of recognition and compassionate response. We might say she artistically bears witness, in all of the complexity of that word, and her practices of gazing complicate her relationship to the place.³⁰⁶ She learns to love the touch of the place, in spite of her aversion to the ugly truth of the matter.

Like Johnson, in her captivating book *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, Terry Tempest Williams attempts a difficult ecological vision. She asks similar questions that bear witness to the complexities of tragedy and beauty. But while Johnson asks questions about gazing at devastated places, Williams extends visual aesthetics to creatively reflect on the practice of writing her witness through a complex play of visual and imaginative poetics. Writing in response to her own experience personally and culturally 9/11, to the violence of any number of ecological devastations such as almost extinct Utah prairie dogs, and to survivors of the Rwandan genocide she later meets, Williams asks a series of questions of possibility. She

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ There are complex differences and similarities between traumatic and bearing witness to the tragic. For theological reflections more explicitly on trauma studies see Shelly Rambo’s *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. Most relevant, here is Rambo’s chapter, “Witnessing Trauma,” which, if transposed into an ecological key both potentially illuminates and complicates Johnson’s narrative. The overlap here, however, is the artistry of storytelling. As Richard Mollica writes, “Viewing the trauma story as a work of art allows for a slightly detached but more careful kind of listening, which, paradoxically, can be more healing to the storyteller and more informative to the listener.” See his *Healing Invisible Wounds: Paths to Hope and Recovery in a Violent World*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 2006: 116.

questions, with care and measured pacing, “How to pick up the pieces? What to do with these pieces?//I was desperate to retrieve the poetry I had lost.”³⁰⁷ These relations and experiences elicit in her nothing less than an inability to write the way she had before.

She continues to describe the scene, begging the ocean, “Give me one wild word to follow...And the word the sea rolled back to me was ‘mosaic’.”³⁰⁸ Williams’ poetic and textual imagination is surprised that she cannot write poetry the way she used to, that she cannot write a fictional narrative in a simplistically plotted way. Her inspiration comes from the actual and imagined practice of constructing mosaics—art, of sorts—images, constructed of stone and glass pieces, assembled together with colored patterns and feel. Williams’ writing brings her reader’s imagination to Ravenna where she is working, learning to construct mosaics where “a spiritual history of evolving pagan and Christian perspectives can be read in a dazzling narrative of cut stones and glass.”³⁰⁹ She describes the sensitivity and attention it takes to put the right tesserae (glass pieces) together to compose an image. The full image up close is a number of individual stones and glass pieces; assembled, each piece “converses” with each another to create an entire image that otherwise could never exist. “A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken,” she notes.³¹⁰

As Williams describes the practice of making mosaics, there is no symmetry or simple perfection. The mosaics live as an interplay of surfaces and colors, each with their own shapes and unique fits. And yet each in “conversation” with the others evokes an image, a possibility of creation. Mosaics are uneven, fragile, conversant, and beautiful.

³⁰⁷ Terry Tempest Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World*. New York: Random House Books, 2008: 2.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-4.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

Williams attempts to embody these features throughout her entire text; the writing unfolds over nearly four hundred pages in fragments, quotes, bits and pieces of stories—long and short. Each piece functions as tesserae in her poetic reconstruction of beauty and what beauty might be in the wake of tragedy. The words shimmer off of each other, holding both the gaps of tragedy and the beauty of relation simultaneously. She chooses to write in an entirely new way, for this is her only possibility of speaking beauty with the fragments. “There is a perfection in imperfection. The interstices or gaps between the tesserae speak their own language in mosaic.”³¹¹

Such imperfection is precisely how she focuses her attention on endangered prairie dogs in Utah, for instance. Her fragments begin to awkwardly move together. She arranges bits of a Senate Bill, her own reflections on the eradication of black-tailed prairie dogs, a piece from a 1920 United States Department of Agriculture Yearbook, including methods about destroying prairie dogs, contemporary reports on their management, a letter from a biologist, a section from USA today, a quote from Aldo Leopold, Jane Goodall, others, observational notes about prairie dogs complete with specific times of observation, and the sources go on and on. Each fragment illuminates a larger tragic story about the precarious life of the prairie dog population, carefully reflects on animal ethics, mass extinctions, human management of land, etc. Some of the words compose images: make the shape and structure of a prairie dog itself. And the emotional weight of the fragments together, each one to be savored, each one reflecting, interpreting, and poetically illuminating the other fragments lures the reader’s attention into the predicament in a way no linear narrative might.

³¹¹ Ibid., 35.

Williams later reflects of our possibility and creativity that, “We can improvise. We can create without a map. And we don’t have to live in isolation. The gift of an attentive life is the ability to recognize patterns and find our way toward a unity built on empathy.”³¹² Like Johnson’s practice of the gaze, Williams’ practice of attentiveness allows her to improvise connections, fragments, conversations, tesserae of words together, in ways that both create connection for her but also evoke political possibility for her readers. As Williams concludes, “Finding beauty in a broken world becomes more than the art of assemblage. It is the work of daring contemplation that inspires action.”³¹³ The readers of these fragments might feel empathy for the way they fit together, for the complex gaps, connections, and relationships they illuminate. Glimpses of stories in their illuminating creativity bring people together in the artistic telling and hearing of those stories as well as the political movements and collective responses that might emerge.

I take Johnson’s and Williams’ accounts and questions of bearing witness to the earth up here not to hold them up as models or normative or unproblematic in terms of how we should respond to the contemporary anthropogenic tragedies of the ecological world. The metaphor of “brokenness” both writers invoke and that term’s shadowy binary of “wholeness” can be quite problematic in use.³¹⁴ What I’m attempting to point towards, however, is a complication of beauty for both Johnson and Williams in attention to the wake of tragedy. Ecological beauty, eco-poetics, is complicatedly implicated in the messiness of bodies, the tragedies of everyday life, and the tragedy of structural ecological violence. Gazing or writing about planetary life as

³¹² Ibid., 385

³¹³ Ibid., 385.

³¹⁴ As Sharon Betcher observes in *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, “Reading the disabled body as broken conflates these two quite distinct analytic moods—that is, structured sin and pathology, making it nearly impossible for contemporary Christians to get our bearings on the critique of normalcy.” Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007: 36.

beautiful must include counternarratives, fragilities, tragedies, unexpected failures, grief, loss. In short, beauty must take into account the ungrounded ground of the flesh of the earth; there is no beautiful ideal separable from the fragility of flesh. In their recognition of this reality, both Johnson and Williams are surprised by a strange compulsion to write differently, engage politics differently, and account for beauty and what they love differently. The very aesthetics of their writing reimagines itself in creative response.

In the midst of the beauty of their writing, Tsing, Johnson, and Williams all lure their readers to look with attentiveness to the irreverent beauty of unexpected and damaged places. They cultivate attentive *affects* that hope to work through environmental despair to new forms of beauty and politics. I might want to take this ecological attentiveness even further. Ecocritic Nicole Seymour argues that what we need now, in the face of the absurdity of ecological writing in the face of devastating loss, is an *irreverent ecocriticism*.³¹⁵ Seymour writes frankly that, “My students often ask me if there’s hope for the future of the planet. I tell them that it’s probably going to hell in a handbasket, and all of us with it. And then I laugh.”³¹⁶ Seymour’s laugh here isn’t nihilistic—she calls it “bad environmentalism”—but instead recognizes the occasional absurdity writing on climate justice when so much has been lost already and so much “futility” and “ridicule” is experienced daily. Seymour wants to cultivate attentions and arts that neither falsely optimistically look towards a beautiful future that will never be and pessimistically give up on the ecological enterprise in full. Instead, turning to queer theory, she argues for, “an irreverent turn in ecocriticism, one whose inquiries are absurd, perverse, and humourous in

³¹⁵ Nicole Seymour, “Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism” *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4(2) July 2012: 56-71. I focus more on the irreverent in the form of Isabella Rossellini’s queer ecological film series *Green Porno* in “Irreverent Theology: On The Queer Ecology of Creation” in *Meaningful Flesh: Reflections on Religion and Nature for a Queer Planet*. Ed. Whitney A. Bauman. Punctum books, 2018.

³¹⁶ Seymour, 56.

character, and/or focused on the absurd, perverse, and humorous as they arise in relationship to ecology and representations thereof.”³¹⁷ Weird and perverse ecological attentions—to fungi and the societies they create, to the materiality of broken mosaics, to oil-covered pelicans as implicated in Divine self-creation—might open up understandings of adaptation and resilience in the wake of global warming. The irreverent inquiry can span writing, dance, land art, protest songs, guerilla gardening, and more.

That is, the mysterious aesthetics of writing attentively explore, sometimes irreverently, new textures of the tragic beauty of earth. Piece by piece, they artistically reflect on the contrasts and ambiguities of life and death. They might invite us, in Catherine Keller’s words, “to embrace, even to *feel*, the adaptive resilience of the planetary web of a living interconnectivity” or, even more, an “apophatically canny ecotheology” might just “intensify our awareness not only of our own implication in the planetary degradation but in [earthy] possibility.”³¹⁸ And that sensitivity motivates readers to imagine their ecopolitical agency differently as a response.

As Rob Nixon notes, “Writer-activists can help us apprehend threats imaginatively that remain imperceptible to the senses, either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even physiological life of the human observer.”³¹⁹ Writers like Johnson and Williams in their sensitivity of language and imagination of senses attune their writing to the “slow violence” of things like global warming in ways that open up our visions and imaginations as well. Such writing plays with the visible and invisible, allows us to critically reflect upon our places on the

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

³¹⁸ Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015: 269. The chapter, in fact, is called “Broken Touch.” Mosaics abound..

³¹⁹ Nixon, 15.

earth in more and more sensitive ways, in turn. Nixon continues, “In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible to the immediate senses.”³²⁰ Perhaps this kind of writing is precisely which makes a strange and beautiful resilience glimmer, even within the tragic (Johnson), even within the unexpected creativity of our creativity and connections (Williams). Many contemporary poets who wrestle with ecological themes work with precisely such connections.³²¹ Such a poetics play with and revels in “sights unseen” (Nixon) in capacious, attentive, and evocative ways.³²² Such a poetics is precisely why I’m flirting with such unconventional texts for theopoetic deliberation right now.

Writing the Tragic Beauty of Earth and Divinity

What writers like Johnson and Williams both gesture towards is the possibility of a reimagined earthen aesthetics where absurd places identified with pain or abjected are not discarded or left for lost. A number of theologians sing some such possibilities as well. In their recent text, *Awake to the Moment!*, the theologians of the Workgroup on Constructive Theology observe that theology remakes the world. They note that “world-making constitutes one way of doing theology, of negotiating among inherited traditions and crafting out of them innovative ways of being and living in our concrete contexts for more liberative purposes.”³²³ Theology

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ I think of, particularly, Denise Levertov, Todd Davis, or Kendel Hippolyte. Philosophically, Michel Serres’ prose moves between poetic and earthen fragilities. Especially his *Biogea* referenced in Chapter 1.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ The Workgroup on Constructive Theology. *Awake to the Moment!: An Introduction to Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016: 108-109.

goes about the work of recrafting, of reweaving, and rekeying our attentiveness to the textures of the planet.

The theologians of the Workgroup note that Mark Lewis Taylor has argued for a new kind of aesthetics and “Christian theatrics” (we might hear echoes of irreverence here, as well). The creative arts in writing like that of Johnson and Williams often are of “world-making significance.” Theologians like Jim Perkinson point to forms of genesis and creativity out of annihilation, “Genesis ex Annihilo.” With Eriugena in mind, we might here “Creatio ex theophania.” And theologians like Catherine Keller reframe our creativity into the course and chaos of creativity, “creatio ex profundis.”³²⁴

Each one of these terms expresses an unflinching imagination and attentive creativity can also be thought of in terms of the writing of lament, refocusing attention to political empathy. “Lamenting horror,” the Workgroup writes, “can have the unintended effect of making one more human. It prunes one’s self-absorption. It renews one’s commitment to the world, moving one outward towards others and inward towards God.”³²⁵ Lament re-locates human beings in a world, indeed a planet, of human and nonhuman actors performing their desires for life and flourishing. They continue, “Lament joins religious emotions...and ethics.”³²⁶

Theologians focusing on biblical texts don’t often think of lamentations and beauty together, but books of Lamentations, the cries of Ecclesiastes, the weeping of Jeremiah all flow into some of the most beautifully captivating and poetic of writing. Cries bear our attention differently and beckon us to see loss for what it is. And yet, like an apophatic theology that often produces some of the most poetic and manifold language for the Divine, language lamenting loss

³²⁴ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

³²⁵ Workgroup, 129.

³²⁶ Ibid.

often creates beautiful mental pictures and compellingly redirects our desires to take the world seriously in devastation and possibility.

Such a paradoxical experience is often articulated by the oppressed as a “beauty-to-burden” paradox. Melanie Harris, in her book chronicling the development and perspective of ecowomanism, notes this paradox in the violence suffered by African Americans under white supremacy. Thinking with the work of Kimberly N. Ruffin, Harris notes that “African Americans’ environmental experiences are unique because the movement of the beauty of nature found in black peoples’ deep awareness and connection with the calming rhythms of the earth is simultaneously marked by the horrors of the lynching of black bodies, the realities of rape and oppression of black enslaved women and men, and the domination and cruelty of white racism, and the control and abusive ways of white male slave owners and white women mistresses.”³²⁷ The memory of violence complicatedly and paradoxically infuses the landscape (in the wake of the Plantationocene talked about in Chapter One) at the same time as experiences of ecological beauty abound. The “experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils,” Ruffin notes.³²⁸ The paradox lives entangling lives of meaning and loss.

Throughout each chapter of this project, I’ve been noting that theophany hones our attention to our contexts of loss and justice. Here is where our new senses of theophanic or epiphanic materiality direct our attention differently. One of the most beloved and original theophany stories is precisely that of the burning bush that calls Moses on Mount Sinai, as noted in Chapter Two. The theophany is divine attention to the lamentation of the Hebrews in Egypt: “I

³²⁷ Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017: 41.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

have heard my people's cry." The experience of ecological beauty—or epiphanic beauty—in the burning bush urges Moses to hear the cries heard by the Divine. Those cries turn Moses towards resilience. Moses, the one who feared he could not speak, collaborates with natural elements, Aaron's speech and acts in response to lament. Moses feels the cries as well, and a polyphony of attention and Exodus drama occurs. Loss and slavery are real; so is the searching for manna to sustain people in its wake. Those cries occur in the midst of lamentation, loss, beauty, and hope simultaneously, a new kind of tragic beauty that might lure us to live resiliently in the wake.

Most resonant with these writers might be Sharon Betcher's argument for a "corporeal generosity" in our social flesh." In her book *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City* offers the most compelling case for a reexamination of theological aesthetics and global economics (the same economy emitting greenhouse gasses, still, relentlessly, our dark side). In a chapter called "'Fearful Symmetry': Between Theological Aesthetics and Global Economics," Betcher opens up the possibility for a reconsideration of beauty by reexamining an articulation of beauty by the philosopher Elaine Scarry. Scarry's contention, in *On Beauty and Being Just*, is that "beauty...intensifie[s] the pressure we feel to repair existing ethical injuries."³²⁹ What is beautiful is what is protected. And despite her acknowledgement of the uneven surfaces of life, Scarry argues that the most important value of beauty is symmetry, "the balanced proportions of the fair and seemly."³³⁰ For Scarry balance, symmetry, and fairness all win out.

But while symmetry, fairness, and justice all work together to constitute the dynamics of beauty in Scarry's imagination, Betcher makes a vital critique in conversation with disability

³²⁹ Quoted in Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2014: 52. It does so for Scarry in a number of ways. Betcher delineates these on page 52 as well.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

studies. She observes that “Disability is defined precisely by its lack of ‘aesthetic symmetry,’ and one marked categorically ‘disabled’ recognizes this love of symmetry as one of our most modern structures of exclusion.”³³¹ As she notes, this exclusion structures public spaces, the global city, cultural space, and our imaginations in frightful ways.³³² “Symmetry, the presumed primary attribute of beauty here, becomes a fearsome measure or standard of belonging.”³³³ Bodies are normed and brought into line, measured or discarded based on their conforming to symmetrical standards.

Regarding earth, Betcher points out that our sense of planetary space is no longer one contingent on the dualism of the symmetrical cities of human culture and the unruly jungles of wild nature. We live in a cosmopolis, a global city, where cultural interactions and valuations of beauty structure and lure ethical action on a planetary scale. She writes, “Changing our aesthetic beliefs about the world involves not only how we decorate and move in our own bodies, but what we imagine as good, habitable places.”³³⁴ Committing ourselves to the textures of this earth means inhabiting that very earth with wide care and concern. Betcher’s criticism opens up the possibility for an aesthetic reattention to planetary life. We might become attentive to a variety of aesthetic possibilities, tragedies, identities, finitudes, and relations.

I might say, analogically, if Johnson, Williams, or Seymour can open their aesthetic imagination in hospitality to a variety of tesseræ and forms, we may be getting closer to what Betcher calls for when she notes that, “If beauty were not so much about enforcing symmetry as welcoming (in the words of Charles Darwin) ‘endless forms most beautiful,’ we would be well

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid., 56.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

on our way to cosmopolis, that dream of a mongrel city.”³³⁵ The fragility of bodies, places, our social flesh with each other and the earth desires to be welcomed and cherished. Indeed, Betcher takes on such an attention to our habits of aversion from the fragility of bodies and fear of loss. She suggests Christology “interpolated through Buddhist tonglen, a meditative practice for extending loving kindness through the aversions of fear and pain.”³³⁶ In this way, not unlike Johnson or Williams, Betcher sets her meditative gaze on working through pain and aversion so as to welcome the tragic beauty of creation and mobilize her creative and political empathies with that very flesh. Tonglen involves corpse meditation – a focus on the ruination or death of bodies. Such a practice attending to beauty in the wake of capitalist ruins, a la Tsing, might illuminate our attention differently.

For Betcher, riffing off of process philosophy and the “fragility of evolutionary evolutionary emergence,” even God is implicated in the tragic beauty of the earth. “Indeed, for process philosophy, beauty is ‘nothing other, nothing less, nothing more than a disclosure of the divine activity’ at the heart of the cosmos—that is, God more particularly as ‘[l]ove [that] bears all things.’”³³⁷ God, affected by the world, nature, or chaosmos of existence takes on a kind of tragic beauty. Divinity—Spirit, for Betcher— carries, feels, the utter tragic beauty of creation and bears death and life in love. We might call that theophany.

In her recent pneumatological work, Shelly Rambo reflects on a similar aspect of divinity. How might we imagine a Spirit that bears all things further? In *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Rambo develops what she calls a theology of the “middle Spirit” in the wake of trauma. How can one speak of the Spirit of life, she asks, when “the line between death

³³⁵ Ibid. 67

³³⁶ Ibid., 71.

³³⁷ Ibid., 66.

and life is no longer, in Susan Brison's words, 'clear and staining'?"³³⁸ Rambo's response is that Spirit somehow remains, exceeds the fuzzy distinction between life and death in love. It remains in the middle, "persists where death and life defy ordinary expression."³³⁹ Indeed, somehow Spirit bears witness to both life and death by breathing in that between space, remaining in them as love.

This sense of divinity, with its solidarity in the midst of between spaces, evokes imaginative possibility as well. Rambo continues, "In the work of trauma healing, the capacity of imagination is not a poetic luxury but, instead, a necessary component of survival and healing. Imagination is essential to revivification."³⁴⁰ Imaginative exploration opens up a reengagement with the world, a hospitality with what is and what can be, and it urges new senses of beauty and art in the wake of trauma. And appropriately so, for "Pneumatology is tied to finding new forms of theological writing, to a practice of finding new ways of speaking beyond platitudes and dogmas...Spirit initiates a new language, a poetics."³⁴¹ Theological aesthetics speaks anew while working in the midst of the fuzzy boundaries of life and death.

Writing Possibilities of Earthly Flesh

What would it mean to consider a theophany that remains in love in the ecological fragilities and devastations of the Anthropocene? How might a Spirit of corporeal generosity or a theophanic "middle Spirit" meeting us in the everyday direct our attention and our love in the midst of the irreverent ecological boundaries dissolving life and death? Might that Divinity, too,

³³⁸ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 114.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

lure us on to new ecological expressions of beauty, to a new poetics of tragic beauty? How would we write about the planet, mobilize advocacy amidst the planet if the Spirit of love remained in the interstices of our gaze, in the gaps of the tesserae we gather? Might we, gaze harder in the midst of the ambiguities of death and life? Might we seek solidarity with fullness of the fragility and beauty of social flesh? Might we sing again?

And I emphasize the word “might” here. Talking the creation of beauty, of attending to the tragic beauty of the world, thinking about humility, joy, pleasure, and possibility on this tough new planet will and should feel quite disconcerting. We’re in uncertain territory and the concrete practices practiced and words written will sound and feel unfamiliar. But the practice of evoking, attending to the tragic beauty in nonhuman life, practicing a fragile kind of inquiry into an earthen beauty, perhaps, at least begins to open up our anthropocentric, our human centered imaginations into the possibility that the way we inhabit and imagine the earth could be perceived in other ways. “Sights unseen,” as Rob Nixon would say. Epiphanic attention, as this chapter contends.

I have, throughout this chapter, been assembling the mosaic of a possible theopoetics. I’ve been reflecting with thinkers who take the uncommon task of loving the fragility and resilience, the tragic beauty, in our ecological life together. Each voice of this writing does not fully, logically, work together. Neither do their own particular engagements with the structures of violence and life fit neatly together. But the gaps are meant for friction and reflection—generative and possible. Each of these writers evoke us to a new poetics, a new theopoetics where attention to cultural aversions upend our expectations of beauty and lures us to a solidarity, empathy, and hospitality beyond our expectations and narrow categorical assumptions.

Perhaps the theo poetic of the earth for our time is precisely a politics of attentive lamentation. The lamentation of the world, polyphonic praise-singing in its tragic beauty, is precisely the thing that bears enough creativity to seek resilience, hope, and joy in the midst of our rage and loss. The lamentation of the earth's tragic beauty, flush warm as it is, is precisely the imaginative space of creative community and nonviolent protest of the energies that increase our carbon count. As Judith Butler ponders, "Perhaps non-violence is the difficult practice of letting rage collapse into grief since then we stand the chance of knowing we are bound up with others such that who I am or who you are is this living relation that we sometimes lose."³⁴² In grief, or in recognition of our tragic fragility we might recognize a call, a lure to incarnate a politics of life together where that living relation is cherished.

In a collapse into a more earthen grief, we might in fact piece together a beautiful, expansive hospitality that fosters ecological relations or embarks into rebuilding and adapting as a new planet together. Attention to the fragility of the world and attention to the fragility of our shared predicament in the world might occur together. The political theorist William Connolly argues for exactly that unexpected possibility. He notes, "Almost paradoxically...an educated sense of the fragility of things today solicits a more refined sensitivity by us to dangers attached to several contemporary institutions and role definitions and that the inculcation of such sensitivities must be linked to a more militant democratic politics"³⁴³ to address the moral quandaries economic injustice and climate change. Our shared fragility together demands, for Connolly, a kind of moral responsibility and resilience for each other's well being. We have to sing the fragility of the planet just as much as we sing in lament and protest of unjust

³⁴² "Watch Judith Butler on Rage and Grief" *Critical Theory*. Last accessed July 2, 2014.

<http://www.critical-theory.com/watch-judith-butler-on-rage-and-grief/>

³⁴³ William Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Self-Organizing Processes, Neoliberal Fantasies, and Democratic Activism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013: 10.

exploitations of that fragility. Or, as Tsing reminds us, “Without stories of progress, the world has become a terrifying place. The ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment. It’s not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction. Luckily there is still company, human and not human.”³⁴⁴ The question is what kind of political life and cosmopolitical commons we might create in that company. We turn to that moral commons and conviviality next.

An everyday lamentation, a biblical groaning, which emerges from the tragic beauty of oil-soaked pelicans, the screams of dying whales, the weeping of islands into the sea, the loss of cultures and species and futures, speaks back, simultaneously, ambiguously, fearfully, a cry of resistance, resilience, cherishing living and dying things. For in the sad beauty of lamentation is a fragile possibility for creaturely energies to speak back in moral pleasure and creative love. In the failures of lamentation we might edge to dismantle the all-too-human injustices that now bring our pale blue dot to a crucifixion of species, hitherto unheard of in the entirety of the cosmological history of the earth. We must sing of the wild messiness of planetary and divine beauty together—eyes wide open, hospitable to our creatureliness—tragic as it is and will be.

³⁴⁴ Tsing, 282.

“Like a recent cutover, the river stirs up a thick stew of conflicting feelings in me—horror, sadness, wonder, gratitude—that reconcile themselves into what I call, for lack of a more precise word, *savor*: a state deeply familiar and grace-charged, a complex reaction to careless human use and the land’s slow, mute resiliency.”

- Jan Zita Grover,
*North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts*³⁴⁵

“The bushes are burning, and some of our prophets are inflamed, desiring not to rescue people from a particular land, but to contribute to healing the earth’s elemental bonds.”

- Mayra Rivera,
“Elemental Bonds: Scene for an Earthy Postcolonial
Theology”³⁴⁶

Unprecedented Spacetimes

If the burning of fossil fuels is burning out the planet, so too do we find our political, activist, and religious responses to global warming burning out. With experiences of environmental despair and eco-grief comes an overwhelming sense that politically or ethically responding to global warming in any of its dimensions is an impossible task. That feeling of impossibility intensifies with growing knowledge of the urgency of our situation. As Willis Jenkins writes in his *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*, “Ethics seems overwhelmed by climate change. None of our inherited moral

³⁴⁵ Jan Zita Grover, *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 1997: 98.

³⁴⁶ Mayra Rivera, “Elemental Bonds: Scene for an Earthy Postcolonial Theology” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*. Ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew. Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2009.

traditions anticipate practical responsibilities for managing the sky, nor construct institutions of justice to discipline power across cultures and generations, nor imagine harming and loving neighbors through diffuse ecological flows.”³⁴⁷ Indeed, “atmospheric powers escape the bounds of justice or make talk of loving neighbors unintelligible...”³⁴⁸ Ecocritic Timothy Morton calls such powers a “hyperobject,”—we cannot fully escape being shaped by the materialities and energies of global warming, even as we try to contemplate them.³⁴⁹ We can never fully disentangle ourselves from the intricacies and intimacies of global warming or step outside the problem to “get a bird’s eye view.” Hyperobjects, as Morton argues, are “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”³⁵⁰ In my figuration, we might consider these as “hyperassemblies” of manifold material agencies. Epiphanic attentiveness demands that we consider the layered complexities of earth from within earth and as earth itself. The question remains, how do we think across the entanglements of time, geologic materiality, elements, spatial politics, unexpected effects, or emergence of problems of moral consequences we never could have known?

This project has attempted to make the case for a collaborative resilience with divinity and creation, and that different kinds of speculative storytelling about the relations of divinity and earth might make engage a process of remaking that moral challenge. To view earth as a vast, theologically-re-encharmed manifold of theophanies offers insight into potential ways of honing our theological attentiveness to the world. If divinity is wrapped up all in all, creatures might bear a burning, mysterious alterity that beckons both attentiveness to both the apophatic

³⁴⁷ Willis Jenkins. *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice and Religious Creativity*. Georgetown University Press, 2013: 16 – 17.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17

³⁴⁹ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

mystery of creatures and the apophatic mystery of divinity. If divinity enlivens a set of animated encounters, creature to creature, then we might listen to the earth differently, see the complicated interactions of its creatures, blur the lines of nonhuman and human, see beauty in more complicated and earthen ways, and, throughout this mosaic of possibilities, we might be empowered to think about collaborative resilience with our epiphanic kin. These textures might be those of an apophatic planetarity.

And we need those possibilities, patchwork and related as they come to form from a variety of devastated locales. As Jenkins continues, “Adequate responses to climate change elude us in part because atmospheric powers outstrip the capacities of our inherited traditions for interpreting them.”³⁵¹ The point here, however, is that *inherited* traditions of interpretation don’t necessarily make way for issues such as these. While I think Jenkins is right in naming global warming as a problem that is, in fact, unprecedented, other moral problems could be named this as such as well: nuclear development and the nuclear theology of the 20th century served as an unprecedented moral problem.³⁵² So, too, did the violent ravages of genocide and the Holocaust of the 20th century serve as unprecedented moral contexts. Other contexts could be named here. The point, however, is that one of theology’s primary, often unspoken, tasks is to go about the process of fabulating innovative responses, striking narratives, fresh adaptations, and resilient metaphors to new situations. Such responses can help navigate challenging situations with worldviews more in tune with our time, with stories that activate actions of justice. Jenkins thinks the task is one of a strategic pragmatism, and cosmological narratives are to be eschewed.

³⁵¹ Ibid.

³⁵² Morton’s category of “hyperobject” applies to these as well. “Nuclear power” is an all encompassing reality.

Rather, I imagine earth-bound cosmological narratives as forms of storytelling that make possible certain kinds of strategic and pragmatically-just action.

Just action is difficult to discern in any context, but, as we have seen, global warming endangers traditions of moral discernment. How can we discern just politics in the midst of and for earth-bound lives and creativities? Does the navigation of planetary spacetimes give us any insight in thinking about cosmopolitics? If divinity wraps throughout all, can we think about those wrappings as spaces of political connection and ethical discernment? That is, do postures of epiphanic attentiveness to the space of this planet offer resilient political strategies for navigating the cosmos together, all-in-all?

Twined Strands

In the 1980s, Jan Zita Grover served as an HIV/AIDS caregiver and worker in San Francisco during the height of crisis. She writes, “by 1986, when I began working there, that city of 751,000 souls, with the highest recorded incidence of HIV-infected gay men in the world, had assembled a system of providing care to the critically ill—that kept ill people at home longer, more often, than any other North American city...”³⁵³ Grover notes that she believes the civic response was one of the “most humane and practicable,” but also notes that the overwhelming loss, grief, and trauma began to take accentuate the toll taken as well.

“What was only becoming clear when I thought about leaving California in 1989 was that AIDS workers were burning out.”³⁵⁴ The grief and rage over human life, inadequate political responses nationally, the unprecedented event of this scale of loss, and the lack of understanding of HIV/AIDS, healing or self-care for workers all aggregated into a larger system. Grover

³⁵³ Jan Zita Grover. *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1997: 3.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

describes the experience herself, “the condition that had namelessly plagued me for months: sudden bouts of crying, inexplicable depression and tiredness, inability to relax, refusal to answer the phone at home, guilt-driven willingness to take on ever more tasks.”³⁵⁵ The human and moral intensity of being present to this unprecedented moral injustice and tragedy took psychological and bodily toll on those dying, those caring, those present with the dying, and politicians and activists seeking new solutions. All mourned.

For her own self-care and to build up a sense of healing, Grover decides to move from California to the woods of northern Minnesota. She desires to recharge of her own moral-spiritual energy. Yet her first friend in Minnesota dies, and the northern woods worked against any easy consolation or moral healing from burnout. Instead, Grover sees clear-cut forests, damaged landscapes, and hears in her imagination the oft quoted aphorism of the great North American Environmentalist Aldo Leopold that, “One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”³⁵⁶ Epistemologically, tragic experience and ecological education make visible the scars often rendered invisible to others. And for Grover, the “twined strands of [her] experience with the north woods and AIDS” hone her attention anew to a kind of tragic beauty that at once attempts to wrestle with complicated entanglements of life and death, the pervasive messiness of human experience, the relationships and communities formed amidst tragedy, and the losses that can never be accounted for. Tragic beauty becomes a way to think about the relationship between aesthetics, theology, and politics, as we say in the previous chapter. Practices of attentive lamentation become necessary.

Attempting to cope with the wounds, Grover finds an unexpected third way to cultivate resilience. She writes, “Instead of ready-made solutions, they offered me an unanticipated

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 81.

challenge, a spiritual discipline: to appreciate them, I needed to learn how to see their scars, defacement, and artificiality and then beyond those to their strengths—their historicity, the difficult beauties that underlay their deformity.”³⁵⁷ As we noted in our last chapter, beauty is not a kind of symmetry, wholeness, or perfection, but emerges in the tragic negotiations of communal life. Attention to beauty and epiphanic illumination of fragile, embodied and unfolding relations allow for evolutionary histories and fragile ecosystems to emerge as well.

Still, in taking account of landscapes and planetary location in the wake of global warming, there may be a temptation to fall into creating easy, moral stories of landscapes or easy cultural representations of loss. Landscapes bear no essential moral truths or easy order. But, as Grover writes, “Land is not only a representation. It is also a physical palimpsest upon which complex human, animal, and geologic acts, most of which are not primarily symbolic, have been written in flesh and tree and rock.”³⁵⁸ The real vibrancy, animation, and loss of such landscapes—from the cuts in the soil, to histories of drought, to tectonic movements—offers a kind of materially and interpretively hard text.

Learning to read complicated and en fleshed landscapes, I argue, is a practice of epiphanic attention or incarnational imagination. Such language resonates strongly with my attempt here to fashion theology into a theopoetics of the earth. Theopoetic dispositions that take ravaged landscapes seriously allow those physical palimpsests to rest upon our concepts. We acknowledge the entanglement of the vast theological commons of imagination with the material commons of our lives and deaths alongside other kin.

Just as Jane Bennett’s attention to the organic and inorganic things that shimmered in front of her, Grover’s attention in the north woods shifts to complicated organic and inorganic

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19

spaces. In her chapter, “Still Life with Landfill”, she notes, “You won’t find landfills and sewage treatment ponds in northwoods nature guides.”³⁵⁹ What is considered “natural” or “beautiful” is exactly the opposite conceptually than a human structured waste dump. Grover’s attention is drawn to the irreverent to seek understanding and grief-work. She notes, “No northwoods habitats remain unaltered; no current forestscape is much more ‘natural’ than a landfill.”³⁶⁰ Grover’s experience of landscape raises the false binary of the “natural” and the “cultural” in the Anthropocene to the fore (though her writing, of course, precedes the use of that term).

For Grover, the entanglement of natural and cultural complicates her attention to local ecological worlds and global environmental history. Landfills and sewage treatment plants attract all kinds of birds and rodents—and are known by birders to be rich spaces for species. And, she continues, “Like the edges between human- and wildlife-dense habitats found at landfills and sewage-treatment ponds, clear-cuts are zones of unexpected richness for adaptable species.”³⁶¹ In clear-cuts in the north woods, poplars and aspens and jack pines proliferate. These species prove quick and adaptable in the aftermath of fire or clear-cuts. They compete for place, and some grow quickly with symbiotic connections with mycorrhizal fungal connections that help them adapt in the wake of a ravaged situation. The evolutionary negotiations aren’t simple, linear, or ordered to watch, but they do show forces of resilience in the wake of a forest tragedy or loss.

What this competitive and changing advantage shows, however, is that, even more than humans could imagine, “There is no privileged forest form, in other words—no single type

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 104

toward which nature in a given location strives. The only surety is that one change entrains another. Over time, patterns may be discernible, but they will not be predictable.”³⁶² Trees and forests emerge in between the normal bounds of order and disorder, between chaos and cosmos—chaosmos, perhaps. As Grover puts it, “Chaos theory comes to the north woods.”³⁶³

Taking stock of that chaos and order—the “mute resiliency” that emerges slowly and unclearly—gives her the patience to see beauty in the wake of ecological and human horrors or the “tragic beauty” of Chapter 4. Listening to that “mute resiliency” in ecological landscapes, “savoring” the complications asks her to see on one hand the beauty and horrors of reality as they actually unfold as well as observe the histories of ecological injustice that bring them forth. She enters into striking and uncomfortable territory here: “It is like looking at a festering lesion and noting the beauty of its smooth margins or marvelling that cells still divide and defend the crumbling body they also destroy. Their life is too short to change their ways: this is their only place, the only way they know.”³⁶⁴ Even the tragic can glimmer simultaneously with wonder—a wonder that does not look away from the tragic and a wonder that does not romanticize the tragic, but a wonder that holds the complex animacy of bodied landscapes and planets.

The complex animacy of these places and creatures is abused, by both those who care for the forest and those who don’t. Despite their best intentions, environmentalists tend to view these landscapes as damaged “purities” to be fixed. But landscapes like this never were “purely” wild—essentialist versions of wilderness or nature. Of course, there is a difficulty here, when complicated environmental histories and observations should inform concrete action and policy.

³⁶² Ibid., 109. A good example of this changing nature of forest life is actually the recent board game *Photosynthesis*, where players attempt to grow their own species of tree in a forest configuration. Sunlight rotates around the board, thereby changing the patterns of growth. The forest changes as the sun changes, and no standard form of forest organization is present.

³⁶³ Ibid., 110.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 98.

“Rather than as witnesses to the unfathomable complexity of natural systems,” Grover suggests, “too many guardians and interpreters of North America’s ecosystems treat them merely as units to be manipulated and managed.”³⁶⁵ Foresters don’t reflect on complicated histories or resilient and adaptable species in geologic time. For the latter, wild places and people are mined and used for the sake of economic advantage. Clear-cuts and ravaged landscapes serve as potential spaces of epiphanic folds of history, injustice, human experience, animate planetarity, and more.

Interestingly enough, at a significant point in the memoir, Grover turns to process theology in order to process her burnout and environmental despair. She quotes Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki here: “The process of integrating relationships produces reality...This process is dynamic, ever giving rise to new relations, new integrations, new realities.”³⁶⁶ Relationships, tragic and beautiful combine in new forms and new integrations, lured into novel interactions. What Grover gets in witnessing these interactions is actually the activity of the creaturely polis, engaging work to recreate the world. She continues, “When I stood exulting at the plenitude of the clear-cut north of the Gunflint Trail, it was because I needed to believe, as a simple act of faith, that this nearly treeless, shorn opening nonetheless swarmed with a universe of creatures all busily remaking it.”³⁶⁷ Just as Joanna Macy “worked through environmental despair” by engaging in the relational connections environmental harms expose—political empathy—so too does Grover see the “remaking of the world.” She concludes, “I needed that complexity as an armature on which to hang my own stories, my own redemption.”³⁶⁸ These spaces expose for her

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 122.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. Many of the quotes come from Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God Christ Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*. (New York: Crossroad, 1986).

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

glimmers of hope, crackling systems breaking down and remaking themselves for good and ill, and the conceptual kin to begin speculatively fabulating her own political position of resilience.

Resilience emerges precisely in the acknowledging of systems that exceed our own political agency and time. All systems of injustice, economic, ecological, racial, exceed individual political actors. To ask into “where” one is in a moment of particularity and observation, as well as to think fabulatively and metaphysically about the mysteries of that space and place actually empowers self-reflection, collaborative thought, and political response. Grover concludes,

If, as Suchocki proposes, whatever evil exists in the world is ‘the cumulative acts of human beings in society,’ if the tragedy of humankind resides in the fact that ‘we are each individually born into a society we did not create...[where]powers of destruction...originate[d] prior to our being,’ then I am eager to claim as my heritage a part in a system so vast, intricate, and fallen that it offers me antidotes to the old iron certitudes...³⁶⁹

Clarity of response, certainty of environmental management (which is thrown out in the wake of the Anthropocene anyways), only imperils political response further. In a sense, The epiphanic kin, relations, and environmental history of a place expose the importance of a kind of mystical connection of place to adaptation and activism. Grover discovers this connection in a moment of entanglement—in the entanglement of her experience in the HIV/AIDS crises and the crises of clear-cut forests she begins to recollect. She feels compelled to learn the particularity of the landscape and in doing so uncovers its apophatic dimensions. “Even the span of a long human life is far too short to learn to respond very wisely to the complex weave of places we choose to dwell...³⁷⁰ Choosing to dwell demands an attentiveness to local knowledge in larger, humbling sets of time and planetary mystery. The epiphanic kin remaking these landscapes demand

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Ibid. 165.

collaboration and a posture of awe: “on my knees, stunned by grace, moved by wonder and gratitude.”³⁷¹

Polyamory of Place

I would suggest that Grover’s entanglement of affective experience, her multilocal attentiveness, and her political activism serve as an example of what Whitney A. Bauman calls a “nomadic polyamory of place.”³⁷² Grover’s attempt to process “burnout” and the broken love that she witnesses, the tragic beauty she sees both in California and Minnesota upwells in her as an attentiveness to place. But Grover’s attentiveness isn’t exclusivist or simple, she is led to appreciate the “complex weave of the places we choose to dwell.”³⁷³ Dwelling happens in manifold planetary locales connected to other locales.

In the field of environmental ethics, quite often calls for “place-based” or “landscape-based” local knowledge rule. Rather than backgrounding ecological knowledge, citizens are encouraged to learn deeply their locations, ecologies, and local environmental history that informs their political actions. In the wake of global warming, however—or, we might say, in the wake of burnout—we have to acknowledge the relations that compose places in a planetary way. The brilliance of “place-based” texts and deep and rich local knowledge exposes more often than not that places are never discrete, closed, unaffected by exchange or movement. Postcolonial environmental historians like Alfred Crosby have shown of the vast biological

³⁷¹ Ibid., 166.

³⁷² Whitney A. Bauman. *Religion and Ecology: Developing a Planetary Ethic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

³⁷³ Ibid., 165.

exchanges happening in modernity, the “Columbian Exchange,” for instance.³⁷⁴ Place-based knowledge does cultivate intimate attentiveness to concrete landscapes, but one discovers quickly in the Anthropocene that the bounds of those locations slip away as we understand atmospheric flows. *Planetary intimacy*, by which I mean a kind of honed attentiveness to the subtle interactions of ecologies near and far, is a cultivated openness to alterity and manifold relations as well. Grover writes environmental literature that follows in the lines of place-based attentiveness, but her writing witnesses to the ways in which local knowledge of place often entangles with other places and exposes odd connectivity.

This insight of connected political locales is pronounced in the Anthropocene not just because global warming enacts planetary effects, but because of the often forced migratory movements of humans, animals, plants, creatures, minerals, etc. Climate refugees, human and nonhuman, find themselves constantly compelled often against their wishes to learn new ecologies and place. The planetary commons creatures inhabit suddenly demands both an understanding of place and locatedness but also movement and migration. Just as we realize matter is not inert, but has agency in this animated planet, so too are the movements of its creatures interacting, moving, crossing and dwelling.³⁷⁵

But Bauman asks if “a desire for stability, place, returning home, or ‘getting back to’ actually exacerbate[s] the ecological and social problems we face today if a robust understanding of global movement does not accompany placed-based thinking?”³⁷⁶ Closing oneself politically

³⁷⁴ Alfred W. Crosby Jr. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492, 30th Anniversary Edition*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003.

³⁷⁵ “Crossing and Dwelling” is a reference that I would like to raise, and is raised by Whitney Bauman from Thomas Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

³⁷⁶ Bauman. *Religion and Ecology*, 127.

might do more harm than good. What does it mean, he asks, to develop a planetary environmental ethic or politics that takes this multiplicity into account?

The answer, he argues, is a “nomadic polyamory of place.” “Whereas an environmental ethic derived from place-based thinking calls for deep love and monogamy with a single place, a polyamory of place calls for love of many places as part of a larger, planetary community.”³⁷⁷ In effect, Bauman calls for a polydox attentiveness to multiple locatedness. We must be sensitive to the ongoing adaptations, exchanges, geologic histories, and biological movements that happen and likely have always happened. The earth is a heterogeneous common ground where exchanges, energy flows, and migrations happen all the time.

Bauman is careful to qualify that he’s not valorizing movement and condemning place-based knowledge. Indeed, I would argue we need attentive, complex place-based thinking more than ever, and epistemological attentiveness to the differences and locations inhabited should *inform* our understanding of the new planetary situation. But to solely focus on a static sense of place might construct false notions and distinctions, such as the division of “nature” from “culture.” “Wild” becomes essential and “out there” versus culture which becomes exclusively human and city-based. We must attend to earth as a planetary commons of the one and the many with injustices shaping non/human refugee movements and histories. To fall in just love with the rich multiplicity of a place or with multiple places is to appreciate them in their queer difference and in their creative transformation.

Epiphanic Space: Wrappings of the Divine

To love a place, one might say, is to see that place in a different light. If we answer Grover’s affective political attentiveness to manifold locale-based knowledge, and if we revel in

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 127 – 8.

Bauman's call to a nomadic polyamory of place, how does theophany matter and what might we find if we look at our entanglements differently? In his article "Wrappings of the Divine: Location and Vocation in Theological Perspective," Lutheran Liberation Vitor Westhelle refers to fluid *places* of significance as certain kinds of hybrid *spaces*. And he argues for what he calls "epiphanic" spaces, hybrid spaces of religious and material significance.

Westhelle's complicated sense of place and space might, in fact, enrich Bauman's sense of the polyamory of place and Bauman's concern that we take both crossing and dwelling seriously in how we consider the significance of place for ecoreligious identity. As a matter of fact, Westhelle proposes that there are at least three kinds of space to consider: Firstly, he describes what he considers to be "locales." Locales are places that are in fact sites of dwelling within the movement of crossing. Locales "send us somewhere else, as much as they are designed to attract us. They are functions not of rest but of motion and transit; they are points in the transition from place to place."³⁷⁸ From stores, airports, and other public transit hubs, locales give a sense of transitional movement. Secondly, Westhelle argues for what he calls "places," that carry, unlike "locales," an "intent...to release one from the transitory experiences of everyday life, from locales we move through."³⁷⁹ Locales might signify itineraries, but places signify the dwelling of home, shelter, seclusion. For Westhelle, "everyday life is a negotiation between these two experiences in an alternate and pendular movement."³⁸⁰ Neither space is static or essential or unchanging, but both do signify affective energies of movement, and I argue that we might consider these constructions in the nonhuman creaturely world as well: between places of shelter, migrations, and the watering holes of locales. In considering the displacement

³⁷⁸ Vitor Westhelle, "Wrappings of the Divine: Location and Vocation in Theological Perspective," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31, 2004: 371.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 372.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

so common in climate refugeeism, Westhelle argues that displaced persons and creatures are those who are forced to only have locales (a kind of exclusion) and never a place. In some ways, the atmospheric life of the planet creates this condition of displacement in pervasive and unequal ways, where the planet becomes a locale without place.

But Westhelle also goes on to say that a third kind of space exists, hybrid space. “Hybrid spaces are not simply transitions between one space and another, like locales. They also are not spaces that center our sense of belonging, like places.”³⁸¹ These spaces are “what grants us the possibility to move around between locales and places yet inhabit neither.”³⁸² Hybrid spaces are spaces that serve as a catalyst for navigating between locales and places. Westhelle gives examples like cafés or sweatshops which entail movement like locales but also force certain kinds of permanence, shelter, and dwelling, for good and ill.

Westhelle qualifies strongly that he is, “I am trying at this point to avoid the use of the notion of ‘sacred spaces’ or even ‘holy places,’ because these suggest a distinction from any other space as being profane. The problem with such definitions is that they tend to be essentialist, as if something of an ontological quality is embedded in their being.”³⁸³ The earth is not, in his imagination, divided into spaces that are intrinsically holy and spaces that are intrinsically not. Instead, space is a mix of both. “Epiphany,” he writes, “marks a differential space, but not for any presumed ontological quality. That which is proper to it is an event, the event in which the divine is made manifest in a given space.”³⁸⁴ Epiphany, as the out-facing of divinity in place, is an event, an occurrence where relations reveal divinity and possibilities of justice to one another. As such, epiphany can happen *anywhere*. “Epiphany can be a burning

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., 374

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

bush in the desert or a stable in which ha displaced mother gives birth to a child...they leave a lasting imprint in the mind and emotion...They call for attention and embody enduring intentions.”³⁸⁵ Epiphanic occurrences might call for what this writing has been calling a “theophanic attentiveness” to the complexities of creativity, materiality, and beauty in place, ecology, and creatureliness. Epiphany might beckon to a multiplicity of ecological loves.

But what exact kinds of qualities (even political qualities) might these spaces possess? “Like monumental spaces,” Westhelle writes, “they are memorable—not, however for their imposing shapes and designs (which they could also have, yet without seizing the gaze) but for their quality of transparency, of sending the gaze beyond the space itself.”³⁸⁶ The gaze attends to the particularity of the features of the space while at the same time opening into complex reflection on metaphysical possibility, divinity, ecological and political implicatedness, or spans of wonder in the midst divine creativity. Epiphanic space serves to invoke or provoke a kind of apophatic reflection of concrete life in a way that doesn’t lure an attempt to capture or control it.

Not only do epiphanic spaces lodge themselves in our memory, but also they serve as archives for the possibility of what I’ve been calling with Haraway, speculative fabulation. “[E]piphanic spaces,” writes Westhelle, “like archival spaces, store memories. However, they are repositories of memories in and through which a future is unveiled, a promise is entailed.”³⁸⁷ Memories do not simply aggregate, but they aggregate and in epiphanic events work with an ongoing sense of purpose. For Westhelle, stored memories lure forth the promise of divinity to possible futures. Strange eschatologies wrap themselves around these spaces. “The memory in

³⁸⁵ Ibid.,

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

[these spaces] is the memory of a future, anticipated (as a prolepsis) in the stories of the past.”³⁸⁸ Speculative fabulation as a theological strategy isn’t simply raw imagination, but an attentive, eschatological creation from the depths of memory. Epiphanic space beckons, and, in a kind of reciprocity, the human imagination dreams up possibilities of response.

Westhelle concludes that epiphanic space is a radically everyday kind of space. “Additionally, epiphanic spaces are places of *parousia*, places where the divine presence is embodied in the very stuff of the world: in a building, in music, in the word, in paintings, in a meal, in statues, in the Book, in the embrace of a friend or a stranger—all wrappings of the divine.”³⁸⁹ Just as Eriugena’s theophanic divinity wraps itself through each creature and body, all in all, so too does Westhelle’s epiphany wrap itself through space and relation, all in all, and we might read these concepts together. As Westhelle notes, finally, Divinity might emerge “in a disguised or anonymous way anywhere in the whole of creation, which makes *any* space potentially epiphanic.”³⁹⁰ The everydayness of Divinity wraps and makes itself apparent in the radical intersection of memories lured into alternate futures. The transformations and transfigurations that happen in imaginations in these spaces are moments of deep political transformation for Westhelle.

Westhelle focuses his last comments on thinking through the space known as “church,” but some of his characterizations of the church as epiphanic space I might also extend to the everydayness of creation. He offers four characteristics: Firstly, these spaces are “poietic,” or they are making and productive of space, a dynamic sense of spatial identity and location. He writes, “in the midst of the unfolding of this weaving, all the rest is *poiesis* or labor in metabolic

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 375.

³⁹⁰ Ibid. Westhelle delineates three kinds of epiphanic space: the Christ, the church, and the creation.

exchange.”³⁹¹ We experience epiphanic spaces as spaces in process and spaces in creative negotiation that divest creative understandings. Secondly, such spaces may open (perhaps like Grover’s experiences) possibilities for different understandings of sustenance and nurture, a place where Spirit “con-spires” with creaturely life for new possibilities. Thirdly, and most importantly for our understanding of the everyday, is a kind of exchange, a reciprocity or release. “An epiphanic place is welcoming but ends not in itself; it sends people forward...Adjacency (*ad-iacere*) means lying by, suggesting at the same time a moment, state, and space of rest but with the impending accountability for the demands that lie near, that are adjacent.”³⁹² The singular, eventive, and everyday exchange of “divinity-in-place” evokes new possibilities of ecological justice, creaturely love or mercy. Epiphanic spaces might offer spaces of cultivated rest, new perspective, and a re-attuned sense of the adjacent relations and problems that also need attention. We might call this the epiphanic cultivation of resilience. Adjacency in the place of apathy.

Westhelle applies this idea to space and human experience of space. Poietic creativity and adjacency account for a sense of movement, displacement, and the navigation of responsibilities. But my hunch is that this resilience is, in fact, not *just* a human experience, but spirals apophatically into the complications of human and nonhuman earth. Or, for example, someone used to an anthropocentric habit might find it refigured by a theophanic attentiveness to nonhuman creation—so much so that the “adjacent” of their own human animality suddenly appears in their attentive imagination.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 379.

Bonding through Elemental Epiphanies

We might return to the adjacent space of the burning bush on Sinai. In her piece, “Elemental Bonds: Scene for an Earthy Postcolonial Theology,” theologian Mayra Rivera reminds us of the elemental constitutions of *any* place or space on the planet. And she turns to the concept of epiphany to unpack a postcolonial perspective on the earth. Reflecting on Moses’ encounter with the glory and elemental fire of the burning bush, she argues that “theology has all too often ignored the earthy qualities of such theophanies, just as it has neglected its own material ground...As a result, our senses have become numbed and frequently fail to perceive the divine in the elemental.”³⁹³ Nonhuman material occurrences of divinity often are forgotten. We neglect epiphanic attention to the earth. But elemental interactions sometimes disarrange us, as we have noted. She continues, “Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and tsunamis are fresh in our memories; not only fire, but the elements in general evoke fears of destruction—for good reasons.”³⁹⁴ Planetary elements and agencies work outside of human control.

But, on a planet constituted by postcolonial spaces and imperial powers, attention must be made to the all-too-human entanglements of these elemental powers. She continues that, “Whether such disasters are named ‘acts of God’ or not, they are not simply natural. Complex questions of the effects of human practices in such elemental conflagrations can hardly be suppressed, especially since combustion and consumption are central aspects of life under contemporary forms of empire, indeed, its driving forces.”³⁹⁵ The very elements shape and are

³⁹³ Mayra Rivera. “Elemental Bonds: Scene for an Earthy Postcolonial Theology” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*. Ed. Tat-Siong Benny Liew. Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2009: 347.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 348.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

shaped by the spaces of imperial power. To do theology responsibly, to critique imperial power, one must think about the elemental itself.

For Rivera, engaging with the elements is an important critical tool. She writes, “Postcolonial theologies in the twenty-first century are called to make more explicit the complex effects of imperial ideologies and practices not only on the lives of human beings, but also on the non-human world. Or, more accurately, we need to make explicit the effects of imperialism in the relations that constitute creaturely life.”³⁹⁶ Indeed, for Rivera, focus on elemental encounters like this deepens the complexity of our eco-political understandings. Elemental manifestations might be terrifying, places of strange convergence, or a “gentle if complex moment.”³⁹⁷

The power of these elemental moments highlights the common ungrounded ground of the planet. Rivera briefly touches on the language of “common” earthy life. She writes, “Despite the justified concerns of a postcolonial theory about the homogenizing impulse of dominant talk of the common, the common origin, the common market, the common language—the common must still be imagined, if only for the sake of the one planet that sustains us.”³⁹⁸ Elemental epiphanies constitute scenes of complex interaction, power struggles, earthly confusion, tragedy and loss. The complex scenes demand attention to the complexity, not attention in spite of it.

As a potential common, epiphanies might urge complex transformations of social justice. Encounters with the other, encounters with Divinity. Rivera notes, “The lowly bush was the key for Enrique Dussel’s reading of this epiphany...He argued that this scene portrays the revelation of God in those excluded from systems of power. The poor, the Other ‘is the ‘locus’ of God’s

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

epiphany.”³⁹⁹ Epiphanic encounters, in their persistence, demand different kinds of attention and justice in the commons. Rivera’s turn to the elemental invites us to engage in processes that examine “the inextricable connections between political, theological, and ecological: deepening its reading strategies and critiques of empire to denounce the mutilation of the elemental bonds of our world and attuning itself to traditions of reverence toward fire, water, air, and earth.”⁴⁰⁰ Our nomadic life, our spaces, our common life, is of earth.

Epiphanic Commons: Divinity Enraptured, Wrapped in Process

I suggest here that Grover’s attentive sense of resilient beauty, the polyamory of place that is cultivated in this new attentiveness, belongs together with Westhelle’s and Rivera’s sense of epiphanic space and elementality as a kind of everyday process. These might all enwrap one another into what I might call the “epiphanic commons” of the planet. Really, here is the theopoetics and the theopolitics of the earth at work. But theologically, ideas of the commons are not without their own conceptual kin.

The idea of the “epiphanic commons” might sound similar to an already existent concept that has captured the minds of many a contemporary ecotheologian and even a Pope—that of the “sacramental commons.” In his book, *Sacramental Commons*, John Hart defines the contours of sacramental place, writing that, “A *sacramental* place is a place that reveals signs of the transcendent and immanent creating Spirit...But the sacrality of a place is visible only to those who use their physical and spiritual eyes to see beyond the immediately apparent.”⁴⁰¹ Hart’s sacramental commons takes on many themes I find admirable: he finds the sacred in the ongoing

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 356.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 358.

⁴⁰¹ John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006: xiii

tragedy of everyday life and Spirit as relational sacred presence can be seen in everyday places and situations.

For Hart the language of the “Commons” enfolds a number of “diverse but complementary meanings. Common places where people gather for food, village commons where communities gather in mutual cooperation (like a village garden), bioregional commons “where diverse species in the individual members live integrated, interdependent lives in a fixed or fluid, expanding or contracting ecosystem.”⁴⁰² Or, the “earth commons” where integral systems and exchanges are the fundamental bases that offer support or creative change in the lives of creatures. These are the places where we live out our common lives, act in political congress with one another, and realize that our planetary life is all affected by all. This earth is, as Pope Francis puts it in his encyclical, our “common home” where we act for the “common good.”⁴⁰³ Vandana Shiva might call it an “earth democracy.”⁴⁰⁴

But the language of sacramental evokes divisions of “sacred” versus “secular,” and risks redrawing old binaries of essentialist visions of creatures or space. The language of sacred presence often gives the implication that God is a stagnant being who remains unchanging or secretly and essentially hidden but one could easily excavate its essence underneath creation. Indeed, Hart’s language concerning human agency could ally itself with a dangerous latent anthropocentrism where humans alone in their spiritual vision must uncover the divinity in the common political space of the earth.

⁴⁰² Ibid., xvii.

⁴⁰³ Pope Francis, *Laudato si’: On Care for Our Common Home*. Website Access: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

⁴⁰⁴ Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2005/2015. See also *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology*. Eds. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Catherine Keller, and Elias Ortega-Aponte. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Epiphany, however, might risk something different. Epiphanic space might conceptually risk fabulating that divinity is just as much in process as creation is, bursting through in moments of ecstatic relationality. Theophanic attentiveness might not reveal the sacred underneath or behind spaces of suffering, but might instead recognize the animated wrapping of divinity in, with, and under the tragic. An epiphanic commons might recognize earth as not just as some form of sacred order, but as an unruly glory in its tectonic and atmospheric movements, and interplay of elemental, ecological, and divine creativity. And whereas a sacramental commons might provide a necessary positive step for reimagining how human being see the earth, epiphany might eschatologically charge visions of resilience and urge different forms of speculative, fabulative forms of storytelling that reimagine our adjacent responsibilities and polyamorous connections to the earth. Sacramental attentiveness risks the danger of becoming a politics of exclusivity and localized place. If a particular locale is exclusively sacramental to me, why would I pay attention to any other place? If the locale and its adjacencies are epiphanic, they might call upon my agencies to see how ecological dynamics unfold across various contexts, bioregions, and energy exchanges. Anything can become epiphanic and call to a different and more difficult understanding of identity, creatureliness, and justice.

Hart qualifies sacramental attentiveness to nature as not solely attention to pristine nature, but I worry that the language of sacramentality evokes a kind of pristine idea of the world, where an unspoiled landscape becomes the site of sacramental communion with the divine. Sacraments, too, have been used as sites of exclusion and regulation in the church. Theophanic imagination, however, may often show itself as unruly, affective, dripping with ecstasy and calling, and appears in unexpected ways—to Moses in a burning bush, to Elijah in the sheer silence of Mount

Horeb, to the disciples in the transfiguration of Jesus, to Balaam in the mouth of an ass, Job rediscovers a cosmological multiplicity in the theophanic whirlwind.

Many of the writers I've evoked throughout the course of these chapters have used epiphanic language to describe the odd entanglements of tragedy and beauty they find themselves in. From Jane Bennett's shimmer of dead rat and bottle cap to Kath Weston's crackle of a system breaking down, to Melanie Harris' and Sharon Groves' tragic sense of beauty to Trebbe Johnson's oil-soaked pelican, to Grover's mute resiliency—all find emergent and unexpected shimmerings of possibility in the midst of the aftermath. Notions of animate earth, beauty, space, and politics all shimmer and creatively demand reconfiguring in the wake of violence or the chaotic rumblings of the tough new planet. How we embody our political commons of the earth as an epiphanic commons, and what that epiphanic commons might call us to do collectively, politically across lines of shimmering difference for the sake of joy or resilience is key.

Undercommons as Epiphanic Commons: Displacement and Latency

As a concept attuned to resilience and adaptive politics to global warming, what might an “epiphanic commons” mean for environmental justice? Indeed, while Hart and others use the concept of the commons almost as a generic term for recognizing planetary life as sacred, I argue here that an epiphanic commons swirling with eschatological adjacency, might illuminate counter-memories, counter-strategies, and radical political ecological undercurrents for resilience. The effects of global warming, as Bauman noted, are wrapped both through the atmospheric flesh of the present and migrate through moving bodies of matter-energy such as human and nonhuman displaced persons and climate refugees. Might framing our common good in terms of

epiphanic language charge our attentiveness to polyamorous movement and entangled locations? Or, to evoke Rob Nixon's language, might an epiphanic perspective urge an attentiveness to an "environmentalism of the poor"?

In their book *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten think about the language of the "commons" in a radical way. Though they do not explicitly reflect on an "ecological" vision of the commons, Harney and Moten stage a series of essays, reflections, and commentaries about the role of decolonial, critical race studies and racial justice in common spaces of learning like the university. They open by quoting Michael Parenti's anti-imperial film scholarship, and the "'upside down' way that the 'make-believe media' portrays colonial settlement."⁴⁰⁵ Films tend to depict "innocent" European colonial settlers as surrounded by hostile natives who take on "the role of the aggressor so that colonialism is made to look like self-defense."⁴⁰⁶ The life around these European colonial forts and settler populations is backgrounded—and the ecological and political commons that pre-existed settler colonialism is portrayed to be a hostile place to "civilized" practices of enclosure.

Harney and Moten argue that contemporary politics, education and scholarship often take on this role—assuming enclosure and colonial thoughts to be under siege. Like a number of scholars and activists of the commons who reflect on the fissures of injustice produced by capitalism, Harney and Moten argue that thinking of the commons should carry a radical political edge. But they further add that such thinking should proceed with attention to forced dispossession in mind. "Our task," they write, "is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion. And while acquisitive

⁴⁰⁵ Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround.”⁴⁰⁷ Ideas of politics, the generic commons, [white] civilization or likewise, are often coopted by or constituted by structures of unjust power intent on protecting itself from the surroundings. “We surround democracy’s false image in order to unsettle it.”⁴⁰⁸ The epiphanic dynamism of the surrounding, assaults the notion of the enclosure as normative.

The next logical move in their argument is surprising but effective in illustrating their point. The commons Harney and Moten chose to illustrate their point is none other than the “university.” They argue that the university is an example of a complicated (might we say hybrid) space, for “it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment.”⁴⁰⁹ Institutions like universities often serve the interests of society in educating for the sake of sending “successful” citizens into society to uphold and continue that society. Universities often represent or embody the intersectional injustices held in society, but they also often serve as an intellectual escape or, rather, offer resources for resilience, subversion, and challenge to those intersectional injustices.

Harney and Moten’s solution here wouldn’t grant one tenure, but might offer a commons that conditions the genesis of subversive social justice movements or revolution. They write, “In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.” The

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

subversive intellectual, or citizen perhaps, both “plays the game” but also challenges the rules of the game’s enclosure. In an ecological sense, such subversions might range from the production of science that challenges dominant petrocultures or the energy industry’s notions of things like “clean coal.” Or, they might range to reading a radical environmentalist book that encourages environmental intervention.⁴¹⁰ For Harney and Moten, the subversive scholar or activist troubles the commons with the open space of subversion, “She disappears into the underground the downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong.⁴¹¹ The *undercommons*, the space layered into the commons that opens possibilities of subverting expected systems opens up into new possibilities. The revolutionary scholar looks for the nomadic moments, the epiphanic moments just in the corner of their eye, the decolonial subversions that challenge capitalistic, white enclosure of elemental life. This work they call “fugitive” in that the subversive work runs free of the enclosure, challenges the existence of its rules and politics. If we take a biblical-mythic read of this undercommons, Moses in the wilderness, fugitive from the Egyptian state, lives and is sustained in an undercommons of sorts, and the epiphanic calling of the burning bush evokes his fugitive status to bring down the enclosure of the Egyptian state.

While Harney and Moten deploy the concept of the undercommons for the sake of critical race studies and black liberation, queer theorist Jack Halberstam notes its effectiveness in uncovering connections and intersections of oppression and brokenness as well, that, “the projects of ‘fugitive planning and black study’ are mostly about reaching out to find connection;

⁴¹⁰ See Sarah Pike’s recent work on this form of activism in her *For the Wild: Ritual and Commitment in Radical Eco-Activism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

they are about making common cause with the brokenness of being, a brokenness, I would venture to say, that is also blackness, that remains blackness, and will, despite all remain broken because this...is not a prescription for repair.”⁴¹² Fugitive study does not try to repair a broken system or redeem a nostalgic or essential version of an earth that never was. Instead, fugitive study attempts to cultivate resilience and countermemory in the midst of hegemonic society for the sake of living subversively and unexpectedly in the present.⁴¹³ Halberstam continues, “If you want to know what the undercommons wants...what black people, indigenous people, queers and poor people want, what we (the ‘we’ who cohabit in this space of the undercommons) want, is this—we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgment generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part.”⁴¹⁴ We must live in the commons, and not be of the commons. And the undercommons comes the adjacent space where notions of justice might emerge.

Harney and Moten’s concept of the undercommons explicitly refuses the political, considering it a system of exclusion. But a number of thinkers take up ideas deeply resonant with theirs precisely for the sake of political coalition building, systemic subversiveness, and engaged radical ecpolitical activism. Activist and writer Naomi Klein’s 2016 Edward Said lecture, “Let Them Drown,” engages decolonial thinking in order to make such a point. “Edward Said was no tree hugger,” Klein writes, and adds that even “environmentalism” might have

⁴¹² Jack Halberstam, “0: The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons” in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Minor Compositions, 2013.

⁴¹³ See Emilie M. Townes’ concept of the “fantastic hegemonic imagination,” “countermemory,” and “everydayness” in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

“looked like a bourgeois playground” for the privileged to him.⁴¹⁵ Yet, postcolonial writing implicates itself in the political through attentiveness to the violence of othering, critique of the accelerating of social ills, and indictment of racist and ethnocentric cultural imagination.

As Klein continues. “Fossil fuels require sacrifice zones: they always have. And you can’t have a system built on sacrificial places and sacrificial people unless intellectual theories that justify their sacrifice exist and persist: from Manifest Destiny to Terra Nullius to Orientalism, from backward hillbillies to backward Indians.”⁴¹⁶ Stories that undergird these theoretical concept serve colonial violence that others, isolates, and conquers. For Klein, instead, decolonial stories might begin to subvert colonial violence by fostering relations attentive to eco-injustices that reconnect political actors to each other and to earth. These relations span isolation, knitting together political solidarity, and mobilizing urgent response. Klein concludes her lecture with the observation that Said began to articulate that connectivity towards the end of his life, in the wake of the invasion of Iraq. He “noted ‘the existence of alternative communities across the globe, informed by alternative news sources, and keenly aware of the environmental, human rights and libertarian impulses that bind us together in this tiny planet’.”⁴¹⁷ The binding together of alternative communities is produced by and produces political impulses of subversion that often could never be imagined between people, communities, or actors.

As I noted in Chapter 4, Anna Tsing might call this binding part of the “arts of living on a damaged planet,” where the arts of living become also creative acts of subversion. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing adds further texture to the idea of the “latent commons.” As Tsing argues the latent commons consists of “entanglements that might be

⁴¹⁵ Naomi Klein, “Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World” *London Review of Books*. [Vol. 38 No. 11 · 2 June 2016](#): 11-14.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid. Klein is quoting Said’s 2003 preface to the 25th Anniversary Edition of *Orientalism*.

mobilized in common cause. Because collaboration is always with us, we can maneuver within its possibilities. We will need a politics with a strength of diverse and shifting coalitions—and not just for humans.”⁴¹⁸ While she utilizes the word “politics” (Harney and Moten do not), Tsing sets forth an idea of collaborative world-building in the wake of capitalist ruins where collaboration and diverse coalitions lead to subversions of capitalist systems straining, but also allow for possibilities of deploying entanglements of political resilience in the wake of inevitable collapse.

While the undercommons might rely on more human-centered interpretations of political justice, Tsing’s “latent commons” might expand that notion to include non/human possibilities. Her focus on mushrooms causes her to think of the creatures that emerge *in the wake* of capitalist ruins: “fugitive [a word we might link with the undercommons] moments of entanglement in the midst of institutionalized alienation. These are sites which seek allies.”⁴¹⁹ Not every commons is coterminous with undercommons or latent commons, but undercommons and latent commons—spaces of disorientation, subversion, trickster work, carnivalesque play—are glimmers in the corner of our eyes, glimmers that urge different looks at our common spaces. We see the universe slant, as poet Emily Dickinson might say. Rather than imagining events or focusing on the commons as enclosed spaces, it’s the peripheral illuminations that fundamentally transfigure and transform our understandings of spacetime.

For Tsing, the latent commons are spaces like the clear cut forest or the strange ecologies of fungi or aftermath that emerge in the wake of the cutting of a forest. These spaces become spaces of entanglement, exchange, collaborative for survival. When landscape, atmosphere or the planet that embodies both is fundamentally changed, we have to focus politically on what

⁴¹⁸ Tsing, 135.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

emerges. Tsing offers a number of descriptive norms or observations that help think about these spaces. Firstly, “*Latent commons are not exclusive human enclaves*. Opening the commons to other beings shifts everything. Once we include pests and diseases, we can’t hope for harmony...Latent commons are those mutualist and nonatagonistic entanglements found within this play of confusion.”⁴²⁰ Engaging with latent commons can transgress and reform our understandings of creaturely bounds, identity, and relation. Such commons swirl with human animals, a polyphony of animals, plants, fungi, and all the other Kingdoms we impose upon the biotic world. The unexpected frictions of these spacetimes quite often show forth the interplays of chaos and harmony in earthen life, evolution, nature and culture, as both destructive and creative. “*Latent commons are not good for everyone*,” Tsing continues. “Every instance of collaboration makes room for some and leaves out others.”⁴²¹ Decisions, delineations and apparatuses of interpretations can make difficult cuts, difficult decisions for what we care for or what we hope for to survive. Forest management experts know this difficulty deeply. So, too, do biologists and animal activists who must now make hard decisions about what species humans should put effort into preserving when they’re on the brink of destructions caused by human beings in the first place. The tragedy of the latent commons in our contemporary moment, the tragedy of resilience and adaptation, is that ecological care must also be ecological hospice. Humans will have to sit by the dying bedsides of ecologies and creatures we’ve sent to die.

Many environmental activists and policy makers speak as if we as human beings remain in complete control of planetary life—our actions can bring about certain consequences, we can “save the environment” or make policies that will durably enact our sense of the future. But,

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

Tsing notes, “*Latent commons don’t institutionalize well*. Attempts to turn the commons into policy are commendably brave, but they do not capture the effervescence of the latent commons.”⁴²² Our planetary commons are made up of complex geologic, temporal, biotic, and atmospheric energies that will always exceed human ability to forecast or control intended actions and consequences. Of course, politics is a human practice, serving human ends. And yet, I argue, the political solidarity as planetary creatures is precisely what is so urgently needed in our present moment. Part of resilience is learning about collaborating with agencies beyond human exceptionalism or human control. We must learn to develop interactions with the epiphanic commons and engage justice work that helps us navigate through the complex entanglements of creation and destruction in a resilient way.

One of the powerful impacts of imagining the commons in terms of epiphanic characteristics is that no future blueprint for precise economic or ecological political life is set out. The burning bush of Moses does not provide a detailed map for what the Exodus will look like, but instead provides certain forms of strategy to help navigate. Likewise, “*Latent commons cannot redeem us*. Some radical thinkers hope that crisis will lead us to a redemptive and utopian commons. In contrast, the latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble. And humans are never fully in control.”⁴²³ Thinking about collaboration with the latent commons is not a utopian strategy in the sense of a clarity of future, balance or equilibrium. But attending to the dark ecologies and spaces of latent commons might help us navigate dominant systems with better local knowledge, a more honest understanding of human planetary identity. We have to, as Donna Haraway says, stay with the trouble.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Tsing, Ibid.

As I argue out throughout this writing, what we do to navigate this process is a risky collaboration. As Tsing describes her process: “I practice arts of noticing. I comb through the mess of existing worlds-in-the-making, looking for treasures—each distinctive and unlikely to be found again, at least in that form.”⁴²⁴ In a similar fashion, epiphanic attentiveness is not about seeing the world in a uniform way, but seeing manifold epiphanies of divinity and callings to an eschatological resilience in the minute of the everyday, in the planetary moment. Planetary hospitality to the particular relations we encounter and the cosmological relations that make up longer and mysterious spacetimes becomes a possibility. A possibility we may experience rife with odd paradoxes of the unexpected—divinity performing as earth, an anima mundi rife with tragic beauty. One we’ll never quite get right or map out *en totale*, but one nonetheless.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

Conclusion: Convivialities in the Wake

lines braided from their voices and my own speaking together,
an utterance which, if even for the duration of only a few words,
will speak our earth original again into creation.

- Kendel Hippolyte, "Creation"

The St. Lucian Poet Kendel Hippolyte opens his remarkable poem, "Creation," with a deep feeling of forgetfulness. "For days, weeks at a time, i lose whatever it is/ which keeps my senses softened to the sentience of the earth."⁴²⁵ In the course of an afternoon he can "believe the seraphs bear the rain to us" and then as quickly as he begins, the names that he used to call the earth are now "scabs" is in mouth. His attention to his earthly context shifts between the complexities of grit and glory, forgetfulness and attention, the everyday and the epiphanic.

By the third stanza the poet asks the questions that preoccupy the writing of this project: How can we "braid" a different vision together with our everyday experience to speak in new ways about earth? Can we fuse the practical and resilient with the poetic and imaginative in such a way to help live differently and well on a damaged planet? My writing here asks how we navigate the Anthropocene, given complex experiences of everydayness, slow violence, apathy, wonder, and devastating loss.

I argued throughout this dissertation that imagining and feeling our common planet, even creation, matters. And I argued that we should attend to what I'm call an "epiphanic commons" where attentiveness to planetary relationality *in the wake* of global warming is key. Fabulating

⁴²⁵ Kendel Hippolyte, "Creation" *Night Vision, second edition*. Peepal Tree Press, Ltd., 2014.

our planetary relations as theophanic in creativity, epiphanic in calls for justice can redirect imagination in the most radical *and* the most ordinary of ways. Theophanic creativity is a process of joyful con-spiration, breathing with creatureliness in what Lutheran theology might call *finitum capax infiniti*. Traditionally that phrase has meant that the finite can bear the infinite—anyplace or any creature on earth can become host to incarnation. We might expand that sentiment that any finite creature, any finite geologic system, any fault system, any tectonic plate, any human or animal body, any atmospheric system or weather pattern, might bear divinity, all in all. Some might call that a convivial panentheism, but one that doesn't exclude the possibilities of a multiplicitous transpantheism. The finite capaciously enflames with manifold divinity. And divinity, as Eriugena might put it, engages in a complex process of self-creation.

Given of the possibilities of this manifold divinity, then, the title of this project, *A Theopoetics of the Earth*, is intentionally ambiguous. On one reading, this writing is simply one humble theopoetic take on how we might reconceive of earth as creation in the wake of global warming. This project is one practice of “staying with the trouble” to see what kind of conceptual kin might emerge in speculating Divinity. In its second reading, theopoetics refers to the theophanic process by which the manifold novelty of earthy life. Divinity makes and is made in and as earth—Divinity, therefore, is *in* the Anthropocene, too. Epiphanies do not escape the complexities of global warming—they occur in and with that complexity. Earth is manifold epiphany.

When Divinity redirects moral-spiritual energy in places, we can call that epiphanic. Sometimes these moments occur where systems of injustice become unbearable. When we are called to courageously engage in being transfigured and transfiguring our creatureliness in the

flames of creation, that call is epiphanic. When we find ourselves seeing our lives and deaths as part of unsettling ecologies swirling with diverse divinity, we can call that epiphanic. Or, when we collaborate with other creaturely energies for the sake of intersectional, ecological justice, urging resilient and manifold calls of justice, those ecologies can be epiphanic in possibility. Living in the wake of our planetary catastrophes, however small, however grand, is a process of deeply affective politics.

I don't choose the phrase "living in the wake" without an attentiveness to that phrase's diverse possibilities of meaning. Planetary creatures, human beings have woken to the complexities of global warming, and have awoken to the anthropogenic impacts of what we still don't fully understand. Those working on varieties of intersectional justice are learning to #StayWoke to injustice in the present, in all of its messiness. We're awake to a new planet. In streams of planetarity, we live in the wake, in the ripples of those anthropogenic affects, some of those caused by entangled creativities of planet that humans don't fully control. Atmospheric energies and human emissions, for example, comingle and splash, ripple and wave out into other ecologies in ongoing ways over space and time.

There is a final, less acknowledged meaning of "living in the wake" that might shed light on a possible way of moving forward. The old tradition of the Irish wake, of mourning and celebrating the dead might be a model ritual for navigating our time, a kind of latent, epiphanic common itself. After death, mourners gather around the body and affective energies of loss and memory swirl throughout the room. Keening, wailing for the dead emerges in ears and bodies. The lamentations face death head on as a real facet of life and the living and the dead, friends and strangers and neighbors, become an entanglement of a latent commons.

Wakes are not particular to Irish culture, but they take on significant practice in Ireland. As Irish author Kevin Toolis writes about his father’s wake, “It was a blessing of a kind, an act of grace. We give ourselves, our mortal presence, in such death sharings, or we give nothing at all; all the rest of our powers, wealth, position, status, are useless.”⁴²⁶ The sharing of space to acknowledge the reality of death—like *tonglen*, like attentiveness—emerges as an unexpected commons where new memories are brought forth and grieving is acknowledged. Wakes encompass mourning and conviviality—the joyful strangeness of life-together. Family and neighbors eat and drink and celebrate and mourn in messy mixes of emotion, sadness and gladness. More importantly, the *stories* they tell about the dead reconfigure their understanding of loss, their connection to community, and their “relearning the world” in grief.⁴²⁷

That entangled commons, in the wake, communally gathers memories, shares emotion, vulnerability to death and vulnerability to passion for the sake of cultivating and learning resilience. Toolis goes on to write,

To be truly human is to bear the burden of our own mortality and to strive, in grace, to help others carry theirs; sometimes lightly, sometimes courageously. In communally accepting death into our lives through the Irish wake we are all able to relearn the first and oldest lessons of humanity. How to be brave in irreversible sorrow. How to reach out to the dying, the dead and the bereaved. How to go on living no matter how great the rupture or loss. How to face your own.⁴²⁸

The communal cultivating of resilience in the wake of loss helps one work through despair, acknowledge one’s own vulnerability and mortality. Communal acceptance of death is a kind of

⁴²⁶ Kevin Toolis, “Why the Irish Get Death Right” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/sep/09/why-the-irish-get-death-right>. And see my “Insecto-Theology: A Wake for Our Planetary Commons.” *Religion Dispatches*. Nov. 1, 2017: <http://religiondispatches.org/insecto-theology-a-wake-for-our-planetary-commons/>

⁴²⁷ Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World, Second Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

commons space that does the work of memory and imagination for the future. We learn to “speak the earth original again,” like Hippolyte.

I have asked what it would mean to imagine this common space of conviviality and mourning as a kind of model for contemporary ecopolitics? Can we imagine engaging in a planetary wake for human and nonhuman lives together? David Abram asserts that humans have enclosed their political ecologies of energy and emotion to the energies of the planet. He argues that, “our human selves have coevolved with the enfolding Earth, and hence are dynamically tuned to variant aspects of the terrain vital to our continued well-being.”⁴²⁹ That is, our sensual and emotional lives entangle with the planet and unfold within the rhythms of evolutionary and eco-systemic memory. But, he continues, “As the spontaneous reciprocity between our senses and the earthly sensuous has been short-circuited by our increasing engagement with our own technologies—as we’ve entered into a closed loop with our own creations—humankind has slipped into a kind of free fall or runaway state, unconstrained by our actual surroundings.”⁴³⁰ Abram, like many of our writers here argues a re-tuning to the sensuous planetary life is necessary.

My suggestion is that an enlarged sense of the funeral wake as an epiphanic ecological commons, to a planetary awareness might begin to break up short-circuits of anthropocentric attitude. Learning to practice mourning, memory, and celebration in the midst of loss might begin to grab our attention differently with what matters, how we envision our own living and dying with other creatures, and our own complicity in the history of human apathy. There seems something hypocritical in mourning creaturely deaths and biotic depletions we ourselves are

⁴²⁹ David Abram. “Creaturely Migrations on a Breathing Planet.” *Emergence Magazine*. Issue 1:2018. <https://emergencemagazine.org/story/creaturely-migrations-breathing-planet/> Last Accessed: Sept. 1, 2018.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

complicit in. Yet reimagining the wake is not about absolving our own guilt in the spectacle. The wake itself is about confronting real loss with honesty, and honestly celebrating beauty wherever it might be found in memory for the sake of the future.

The practice and experience of wakes also informs practices of protest. Keening, the practice of wailing, became an important mode of protest of nuclear armament. Mock funerals and die-ins become protests of now silent victims of war or policy neglect. The radical gay activist group ACT UP used die-ins to highlight inadequate responses to the HIV/AIDS crises. Grover learned to mourn by facing loss and celebrating ecology in the North Woods.

The losses, the extinctions known and unknown, haunt us. Ecologists name species that are inevitable for extinction but still under protection by human beings “ghost species,” species hauntingly here for just a short moment until they blink into oblivion again. Yet we still conspire with them and provide hospice, some with passionate care, some with utter guilt. A wake for the living and the dead seems less far removed. It might actually already be happening, solemnly or in spiritually carnivalesque fashion.⁴³¹

There are ecological precedents for imagining our rituals and our politics this way. Joanna Macy’s celebration of the “Council of All Beings” ritual, where human beings attempt to arrogate the voices of lost and dying creatures in ecosystems might serve as a kind of wake. Such rituals air the depth of loss but they also engage in processes of celebration—of the intricacy and beautiful environmental histories of interactions and collaborations. Telling these stories might more honestly engage and empower new forms of theological speculative

⁴³¹ See my “Irreverent Theology: On the Queer Ecology of Creation” in *Meaningful Flesh: Reflections on Religion and Ecology for a Queer Planet*. Ed. Whitney A. Bauman. Punctum Books, 2017.

fabulation into the future. In a sense, the entire writing of this writing has been a theological performance of a wake.

What such actions might offer beyond mourning is, indeed, conviviality. Conviviality, too, is an odd suggestion in the midst of recounting so much loss. The term risks a lack of seriousness or a joyful apathy, a practical relativism, in my ecological thinking. But conviviality is serious business, a process of entangling emotional and political energies for support. On one level, conviviality is simply its root, “life together,” and that terminology implies the fullness of love and loss, creativity and destruction.

In the epiphanic commons, however, conviviality is about the shared space of political emotions, affects, and strategies of addressing mourning and enjoyment. Or, rather, the complex ways that those two passions occur together. Practices engaged with the epiphanic commons, like the wake, or creaturely collaborations that make possible ecological justice, if only for a brief moment, weave relations of convivial resilience and resistance. Life together becomes less than simply a discrete fact and more of a shared, connective responsiveness to planetary creatures and earthen spirit-energy itself. Conviviality becomes conspiracy, fugitive breathing-together, for the sake of justice.

Theologically, conviviality is an acknowledgment of the remarkable unfolding matrix of divinity and creation in the Spirit. Divinity takes pleasure in unfolding, all-in-all, and Eriugena and others take delight in this near-pantheistic creativity. The entirety of the cosmos is bursting with a latent commons of diverse creatures unfolding in divinity in a way that does not consume them—or that is, in a way that does not obliterate creaturely difference. My stake here is that divinity accompanies and unfolds with all creaturely life, migrating around, in, with, and under the earth.

In that migration, conviviality is about movement. A polyamory of place, for example, is an affective posture of conviviality. Learning to love the multiplicity of the planet creates a multiplicity of relational reciprocities of lament, celebration, and political action. We learn to feel the textures of words from lost loves, cries from destroyed creatures. Most importantly, conviviality is life *together*, which means a theophanic or epiphanic conviviality is about theological empowerment for *accompaniment*. Divinity accompanies and is transformed by creation, creatures migrate and move and accompany one another, and in the epiphanic commons divinity calls for the privileged to accompany climate refugees and displaced persons in protest, memory, loss, and creativity. Accompaniment is about planetary solidarity.⁴³²

Each of the chapters is an accompaniment, of sorts. Each carries a un/common idea for a speculative ecotheology of planetary resilience. I started by noting our new planetary context—one where global warming is something that needs both mitigation and adaptation. Some of the effects of global warming are now impacting daily life, and one of the challenges that needs addressing by contemporary theology is that of creaturely resilience to bear through a context where our fundamental understandings of where and what we are is now rendered strange, rending apart. I traced certain hermeneutical framings of how earth and attitudes toward the earth emerge in ecotheology, wading through anthropocentric, androcentric, heterosexist, and racist figurations of dominion and creaturely relationship.

I argued that we might engage not in a more “accurate” interpretation of theological discourse but acknowledge, borrowing a term from Donna Haraway the work of “speculative fabulation” that theology is and constantly returns to. We collaboratively create stories and models, from memories, histories, and new experiences, both metaphysical and practical that

⁴³² Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster, eds. *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018.

might accompany us along the way. We're lured on by the strange and slant calls of divinity and in the wake we tell stories of resilience to help navigate the floods of catastrophe.

In my second chapter, I furthered the notion of speculative fabulation by lifting up the "theophany" tradition of Hebrew and Christian thought. In biblical texts, the deep mystery of divinity often upwells in posthuman and nonhuman, elemental and organic relations. A number of theologians, like Gregory of Nyssa and John Scottus Eriugena take these relations as a cue for developing forms of materially enfolded divinity. Drawing on an Irish tradition of elemental spirituality, Eriugena takes his construction of the theophany traditions into a full-fledged doctrinal topos of creation, where each and every creature can be properly said to be theophany of God. Divinity upwells apophatically in and as creation. For Eriugena, this apophatic unfolding of divinity means that human creatures can contemplate divine creativity differently, and that tapping into a form of attentiveness to creation illumines earthly connections. Indeed, "earth" and "abyss" become interchangeable for Eriugena in their depth. Theophanies unfold different mindful understandings of location in what Siewers has rightfully called "strange beauty." And when theophanic relations become circumambient calls for justice or transformation, we might rightly call them "epiphanic."

In Chapter Three, I argued that contemporary scholarship focusing on "new materialisms" and "new animisms" might further a speculative fabulation of theophany for our contemporary ecological ills. Various anthropocentrisms, androcentrisms, and racisms construe people and matter as passive, exploitable, shapeable or utilizable to Western misogynistic and heterosexist constructions of humanity and dominion. New materialist and new animist perspectives, like those from Kath Weston, Jane Bennett, Mel Chen, and Robin Wall Kimmerer offer new potentialities for considering the materiality of the human and the illuminating ways

that matter performs agency in ecological relations. In the wake of global warming, we might see these performances of materiality most as systems break down or in the debris that clutters capitalist lives. Theologically, divinity performs with matter in the swirl of creative energies and calls us to think about the relations of our creaturely kin. Reshaping our “grammars” of animacy, like Robin Wall Kimmerer argues, might offer a small practice for recasting or refabulating our epiphanic kin.

In re-fabulating our attentiveness to our epiphanic kin, in the wake of global warming, I believe we become more aware of the strange ways our sense of ecological beauty and wonder is shifting, becoming more expressive of the chaos of creation. With this conviction, I examined a number of thinkers whose focus on animate materiality leads them to construe planetary beauty and the wonder and lamentation that inspire political action as a kind of “tragic beauty.” The work of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing offered us a way of thinking about speculative fabulation and, indirectly, theology, as the creation of “arts for living on a damaged planet.” Contemporary ecological writers from Trebbe Johnson to Terry Tempest Williams perform some of this art best, and thinking with them, I argue that we need to cultivate a sense of epiphanic attention to tragic beauty as a political act of solidarity with the earth.

Finally, a concept of theophanic materiality and epiphanic kin leads us to ecopolitics, to what I called the epiphanic commons. Epiphany is an occasional glimpse of possibility in the midst of the everyday, a reorientation of cherishing of our everyday energies. Cultivating epiphanic attentiveness is about cultivating micro-practices that help us collaborate with other creatures and collaboratively practice resilience together. Convivially we mourn and celebrate together, learn to bear the weight of loss together, even as that loss doesn’t let up, and, in these times we must return to it in process over and over and over again.

Just as the planets and stars engage in their orbits—spiral, elliptical and irregular—a posture of attentiveness to the earth circulates, changes, discovers new possibilities and is daringly surprised time and time again by new calls. Living in this cosmic commons, stars glisten and glimmer in and out of existence. So do creatures as they feel the affective rhythms and pulses of the migrational music of a changing and damaged and unjustly warped planet. So does God pulse with the rhythms of creation *as and in* creation.

The point of a theoetics of the earth is not to capture the planet, represent it with clarity or certainty, or, even, to understand the complex dynamisms of the earth's processes. We are to engage in learning scientific flows, most certainly, but to recognize that we are part of the interactivities of divinity and creation. To attend to the earth's poiesis, the earth's creativity, is to recognize a learned ignorance. Rather than theologizing from on high articulating what the earth is, a theoetics of the earth must collaborate theologically from below with earthen creativities.

Our work is not solely ours but an energetic creation of earthly creatures. A theoetics of the earth is a thought experiment *with* earth and divinity, attending to manifold matter, beauty, and political adventure. We flow the tides of the energy and materiality of the screen, the page, me in writing, you in reading, more voices and creatures flowing into and out of my words than one could ever properly give credit to. We mourn and celebrate together, and in daring to do so practice a hope that our present losses matter. Perhaps reclaiming a presentist version of a theophanic attentiveness will cultivate future resilience and orbit through the wreckage of the past into the future. There is no guarantee such practices will. But we earthlings, crackling with divinity, should have the courage to smell, touch, taste, hear, see it, to tell stories of a shimmering planet, together.

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