I WAS NOT SEEKING a turtle, alive or dead. Yet there she was, dried shell and crusted claws, long dead under the dappled shade of a Sweetbush. Technically she is a Sonoran Desert tortoise, but I did not know at the time. Nor do I know the names that she would have been called by the Pascua Yaqui (Yoeme), Gila River, Cocopah, or Seri peoples who live, or once lived, in this desert. The Tohono O’odham name for desert tortoise is komkičud. Unsought, this reptilian form presented herself in what felt like an undeniable response to my own cries. You see, as I hiked up the arid red-rock cliffs of the mountainside, ascending towards Safford Peak in the Saguaro Desert, I was holding a prayer. This was my task in the context of a land-based contemplative retreat in the desert. Experientially entering the unknowns of not just our psyche, but also entering the collective “dark night” of ecocide, socio-political collapse, environmental injustice, and ruined relations—the retreat invited us to open to communication from the land itself. What might rock, cactus, deer, and desert moon say if we ask for guidance on how to face human-caused climate mutations and mass extinctions? For me at least, this also meant listening to bulldozers scraping away desert rock for more housing developments. What is the geo-materiality and animate skin of the earth saying about environmental violence, if anything at all? What did a dead turtle say?

And yet, said another voice, perhaps my own mind projected meaning on the turtle. Wasn’t it just a carcass, some insignificant dead fibrous proteins? The turtle shell was not a response to me at all; it was typical anthropocentric hubris that forced this object into my own meanings and desires.

But what if the turtle was an intrusion, an intervention, a corpse remaining after a hunger strike on behalf of the land? Sonoran tortoises are listed as
threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Perhaps this shell was a political agent, communicating on behalf of its species. Much contemporary ecological theory advocates for the agency of the more-than-human. How might we learn to witness such agency? Where are the borders between nature and human mind, between materiality and culture, between our fantasies of untouched, natural ecosystems and the reality of extinction and contaminated places?

Beforehand, on the first day of the gathering, we searched for an object in the desert that seemed to call to us, and then we offered it to a wind-sculpted “altar” rock with aspirations for our world. I was drawn to the elongated, spiky pod of the Palo Verde tree—a small, elegant tree with striking green bark, standing out against the browns and reds of the desert. Holding one pod in particular, its sharp shape seemed uncannily filled with meaning, evoking a religious symbol from my meditation tradition. Clearly, I was in a particularly hypersensitive state, looking for meaning from the scattered symbols in the landscape all around. A few slow days alone in a tent, sitting and walking quietly through the land cultivates more sensitivity, as if uncovering fresh senses. More appreciation of the fleeting directness and exposure of being a body. And perhaps you start to go a bit mad, projecting human meanings where there are none?

We were alone for the next days, each holding our “prayer.” The prayer was intended to be a crying out for the ways industrial activities have shifted ecosystems towards hot, bleak death. So many of us conceptually know the information about our trajectory towards an uninhabitable earth, yet it is difficult to feel in our bodies, difficult to let in, to catalyze concrete changes in our collective forms of life. Despite the fires and floods, we tend to just carry on.

A few hours into hiking straight up through the desert towards the peak, skirting around cacti and scrambling over boulders, my prayer began to feel strong. And as I stumbled through spiked brush and red rocks towards an unknown goal—the dead turtle showed herself, withdrawn beneath the Sweetbush.

A large, green-brown, domed desiccated shell. Striated hexagonal pieces like miniature topographical maps. A few missing fragments, leaving bleached, white absences on the crest of the hollow carapace. Four curled, dusty black, scaled feet with white claws emerging from beneath. A dehydrated, ripped, headless broken neck, perhaps long ago eaten by scavengers or insects, absorbed back into the land.

This was it? This was the message, the sign from the land in response to my prayer? Here, on what is known by some Indigenous communities as Turtle Island, what does it mean when the land presents you the material sign of a
dead turtle? It is said that the difference between an omen and a sign is that
an omen comes entirely without warning, whereas a sign is in direct response
to a question that you ask of the land. A sign is a semiotic act, a dialogical re-
sponse, a gesture amidst a conversation that has already begun. Material omens
and signs from the land are happening all the time—a hawk over the highway,
stumbling over roots, mouse poop in your cupboard, record-breaking annual
temperatures—though modern folks often need a particular pedagogical con-
text to hear what is being “said.” This is one reason why time spent in the
unbuilt environment engaging land-based practices are particularly revealing.
Signs abound. But they are not always pleasing and not always clear. What
appears as a sign could be mere projection, fantasy, or anxious superstition—a
potentially narcissistic and even psychotic rendering of the world as mean-
ingful for me. I recall that in modern interpretations of Tibetan Great Perfection,
or Dzogchen meditation tradition, it is said that the sacredness of the world is
neither for you nor against you. Yet, something in us almost instantly interprets
protrusions from the landscape as either for or against us. If this is true, what
does it mean to learn from the biome in your region as it responds to global
warming? Would we not simply be listening to the echo of our own interpreta-
tions? How do we get beyond a correlationism that only knows how to attend
to the relation between our thinking and a natural world “out there,” the real
object of a dead turtle shell? Signs endlessly defer, and the outside land be-
comes text. As my eyes read the turtle almost directly in front of my face on the
steep mountainside, all I could do was utter, “thank you;” “I see you.”

Watching myself rush to catch the indeterminacy of the sign, I just let be
and sat quietly for a while. Pausing to drink from my water bottle, I gazed
across the valley stretching out to the highway towards Tucson below, marked
with new suburban sprawl and recently bulldozed patches of scarred land,
readied for new construction. From my pocket I took a few seeds and raisins to
offer around the turtle shell. I sat longer.

“Perhaps I should bring one of the fallen pieces of the shell with me,” I
thought after a while. Just as I reached down to grasp the largest and most in-
tact of the thin, brown hexagons, I noticed what appeared to be a curling dark
tail sticking out from beneath the piece of shell. “A scorpion tail? Now wouldn’t
that be astounding.” I was about to steal a part of the body of this dead turtle
and would have been stung by one of the only truly dangerous animals on this
land. Taking a stick, I gently lifted the shell to see.

It was not a scorpion, but the long, dried, spiky body of a Palo Verde pod.

*Where does the human stop?*

*Where does the elemental materiality of so-called “Nature” begin?*
If there is a world utterly beyond human interpretation, is that where we look for guidance to face and change anthropogenic ecological violence? But if we have already altered the very climate of the planet, and spread our plastics and radioactive traces across the globe, is there still a “pure” Nature out there to guide us? Was there ever such a Nature? How might a dead turtle destabilize the obsolete duality between Human and Nature?

Non-Natural

This essay is an inquiry into the concept of Nature, and the Human who seems to stand outside of Nature. When I capitalize ‘Nature’ and ‘Human,’ I am referring to these concepts as they tend to function within modern thought. Instead of arguing for a reconnection between these two opposed terms, I question the terms of the duality in the first place and invite us to explore an ecopolitical spirituality without an idea of Nature. Ungrounded in some pure Nature “out there,” this would be neither a nature-centric spirituality, nor an anthropocentric, humanist spirituality, nor an imagined reunion of the two, but something different—an ecopolitical spirituality ungoverned by an obsolete dualism that no longer serves this earth. By “ecopolitical spirituality” I mean inclusive arrangements of cosmologies, ecologies, rituals, ethical cultivation, and collective, embodied practices that may or may not be associated with a named religious tradition or political movement. Such spiritualities are nonetheless political, working in a variety of ways to remediate, learn-with, protect, occupy, and advocate for both ecological and social justice. Examples could include the Standing Rock encampments, aspects of the Zone to Defend or ZAD in France, and the influence of Indigenous resistance on forestry practices in Bolivia.

Drawing upon a range of contemporary theoretical perspectives, speculative realism, new materialism, posthumanism, world-ecology economics, and ontological anthropology, I am in search of new perspectives for ecopolitical spirituality. I also explore how contemporary spiritual aspects of environmentalism such as neo-animism are at risk of being appropriated and nullified by dominant capitalism. Throughout this essay, I present and amplify a mosaic of interpretations from contemporary theory that not only go beyond the Nature-Human dualism, but gesture towards a different terrestrial perspective.

In what follows, I first rehearse generalized reasons to rethink the concepts of Nature. The next section locates the Nature concept within colonial contexts, and subsequently in terms of an anthropological “provincialization” of
the opposition between Nature and Culture. That is, to make the dualism seem kind of quaint and unique to a specific, and strange civilization called European modernity. I also take stock of the world-ecology view which sees modern, industrial civilization as *too intimate* and *too interwoven* into the material web of life. This essay then turns to collective ecological trauma in the Anthropocene, considering how ecological spiritualities get caught in fantasies of Life in response to such trauma. I then explore a specific case of such a fantasy of Life within capitalist animism in the desert of Australia. In order to tell the story of a radioactive concrete turtle I then briefly take us to the Marshall Islands and conclude with another dead turtle. One who helps us to pull all of these threads together into a set of conclusions that bring us into a short, elemental practice.

Following various signs from these dead turtle shells and other earthly teachers, I inquire into ecopolitical spirituality for these precarious times. Yet this essay is perhaps more of a critical clearing than a concrete set of new views and practices. It is an attempt first to *unlearn* old environmental models, to *listen better* to the earth today.

In brief, although many of us may presume that human beings—a subset of animals—are a part of nature and evolution, the rhetoric of environmental spiritualities often remains consciously or unconsciously rooted in a dualistic vision in which the Human is utterly outside of Nature. This leads to the sense that reverence for Nature and environmental politics must orient towards the preservation of wilderness without a trace of the Human. However, when we attend to our earth right now—which includes massively distributed human destruction and creation spliced into all levels of ecosystems—it becomes difficult to disentangle this vision into neat binaries; it is far messier and more truly wild than any essentialized concept of Nature will allow. In *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*, Jedediah Purdy reminds us that:

> There is no place or living thing that we haven’t changed. Our mark is on the cycle of weather and seasons, the global map of bioregions, and the DNA that organizes matter into life. It makes no sense now to honor and preserve a nature that is defined by being not human, that is purest in wilderness, rain forests, and the ocean. Instead, in a world we can’t help shaping, the question is what we will shape.

Because of this massive anthropic shaping, it is no longer helpful to root ecopolitical spirituality in pure Nature (if it ever was), since such a Nature cannot be found. I do not mean for this perspective to further extend anthropocentric arrogance and exceptionalism, by once again placing human beings in the center of the universe. Instead, I see this post-natural perspective as a humbling recognition of the specific, violent ways industrial civilization has shaped a world
that we cannot help shaping. Anthropogenic contamination is material—we have found non-biodegrading microplastic pollution in every water sample taken from every ocean, including the Arctic. In this sense, this inquiry into Nature does not come from within a social-constructivist perspective: I am not claiming that the biosphere and various ecosystems are mere cultural or linguistic constructs. Rather, I am interested in the materiality of entanglements and objects and turtle shells, not just in their representations. Furthermore, environmental historians and many Indigenous ecologists remind us that even before modern industrial impacts, human presence actively shaped ecosystems, altering forests, burning meadows, cultivating crops, and participating in reciprocal relationships with the land.

For example, before the arrival of settler-colonists in the Americas, much of the land has been described as a subtle and complex garden, actively shaped by Indigenous practices over thousands of years. And today, even our attempts to heal and bioremediate landscapes, create global warming-resistant super-coral, spray sulfur-dioxide into the clouds to prevent warming, and sequester carbon, will not cause a return to an Edenic past but will emerge as something new. Whether this novelty will be beautiful and self-organizing, or monstrous and self-replicating, it will surely be different from idealized pure Nature. I am seeking an ecological spirituality that accommodates such difference. I am in search of an ecological spirituality that honors the ways in which ecosystems have agency and creativity in responding to climate mutations. That is, rather than regarding the earth as a passive object that is simply damaged by industrial ecocide, it is possible to see how the earth is also shaping humans, and actively participating in metamorphoses.

At its heart this essay is an invitation to fall in love with this earth as it is and stay in relationship with this earth as it changes. If environmental spirituality cares only for a nostalgic idea of Nature, and not the earth as it is, we will be in relationship with mere fantasy and miss the elementality as it extends towards us—like a dead turtle. As with any relationship, it matters when we allow and revere someone as they are.

My sense is that there is a need to further prepare an ecopolitical spirituality for what is coming and already here: extinction, floods, privatized water, choking pollution, climactic feedback loops, wildfire-scorched and blasted noxious landscapes, extreme heat and flight from drought zones, and racialized, thirst-driven violence. For centuries, communities who have suffered most under colonialist brutality and capitalist expansion—especially Black, Indigenous, and communities of color as well as women who were often holders of earth-based knowledge—have been fighting for ecological justice inseparable from their own survival. Now, the altered climate, pandemics, drought, and
wildfires are increasingly encroaching on the wealthy and dominant classes that have largely caused the destruction. This is a time to share in contamination, rather than base ecological spirituality on escape, bypassing the earth, or hiding behind border walls. This will be an ecological spirituality without (an old idea of) Nature.

I want to confess here that I am attached to the idea of Nature. It is not easy for me to inquire into its limits. I savor the time I spend alone in the forest, mountains, and desert. As a meditation teacher the idea of Nature allows me to move seamlessly from contemplative instructions on “being natural” and “resting in an unconstrained naturalness” to ecological invitations to “be closer to Nature.” The Dzogchen, Zen, and Daoist traditions in which I have immersed myself are particularly attuned to such a rhetoric of naturalness, although as far as I can tell, the specific double-entendre exists only in European languages, and not at all in the many Asian terms. The proximity between contemplative naturalness and the spontaneous unfolding of natural processes also weaves a politics into contemplative life: If we can cultivate more naturalness, perhaps we can help reorient society towards earth’s cycles. While all of this seems helpful and evocative, I want to unearth some of the presumptions about Nature that seem to be foundational to this rhetoric. The devastating material reality of the earth today no longer provides the same context that some traditions presume. At the same time, I do not want to expunge the concept of naturalness from our contemplative vocabularies; instead, I wish to invite such naturalness in new forms situated within mutation, loss, and global warming—to welcome participation in the earth in which we find ourselves.

Thankfully, such participation will also celebrate that which sustains earth’s evolving beauty and brilliance even amidst degradation. There are still thriving habitats that are all-the-more precious as they change or disappear. As Robin Wall-Kimmerer reminds us, “Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy.” Ecosystems’ capacity for regeneration and self-healing is extraordinary and goes far beyond any human technological capacity: when we stop polluting, deforesting, overfishing, and extracting, many bioregions are able to restore themselves. Whatever happens to dominant globalized society, life will likely continue to grow and change on planet Earth for a long, long time. Our practices should encourage falling in love with place and should learn from and protect all that we can, including promoting land and water regeneration, phasing out pesticides and plastics, and localizing our food systems, among other practices. To be clear, I am not suggesting that we should abandon struggles to block gas pipelines and challenge the fossil-fuel petrochemical industry (as I edit this I am on a train to a large fossil-fuel protest). We should develop just, alternative energy sources.
attuned to local ecosystems, marginalized peoples, and Indigenous sovereignty. This inquiry into the non-natural is not at all about giving up or simply adapting, but about unleashing potentials that remain constrained by outdated concepts of Nature. Human and nonhuman peoples need an ecopolitical spirituality that can thrive anywhere in the mutating skin of earth—whether deemed natural or desecrated. In other words, if our spiritual politics depends on an essentialized Nature, we will be lost.

Varieties of “Indigenous worldviews,” Buddhist, Daoist, Abrahamic, or other complex ways of knowing, describe a journey into the proverbial desert, forest, or mountains, a wandering away from the human-built environment, to receive a vision or attune to the teachings of the more-than-human world. Reflected in moon, mountains, rivers, and the sunlit sky, the “nature of awareness” and the “divine mystery” are often expressed through metaphors from the natural world. According to Zen teacher Dōgen, mountains and rivers are sūtras (sacred texts). Yet we now live in a world in which there is no “pure Nature,” separate from the impacts of agribusiness fertilizers, plastic residue, climate alteration, genetically modified fish, and radioactive traces. Are we ready to read these sūtras? In what mountains or “desert of the real” shall we find our way?

Our age calls for new spiritual metaphors. Mountains, moon, and desert are always available; they just might not be what we expect. And they never have been. There is a need for new rituals based on the spliced multispecies sympoiesis of inevitable contamination. For instance, communities in places ranging from the burning Amazon and Pantanal in Brazil, to new concrete sprawl in Hangzhou, China, to the oil-saturated rivers of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta, to the refugee neighborhoods living near Superfund sites in Newark, New Jersey have had no choice but to root into a toxic space. The geophysical reality of our earth often calls for a non-natural, living contemplation that “stays with the trouble.”

Though this inquiry questions some sacred eco cows, I trust that we may still write poems in fresh desert silence in the world to come and I long to celebrate in convivial symbiotic solidarity with all life and nonlife on our gorgeous, sacred planet. After all, globalized capitalist peoples are not the first forced to discover hybrid political spiritualities amidst cultural and ecological violence—and may not be the last. So it is a good time to ask about a terrestrial spirituality without a grounding in an ideology of Nature, an ecological spirituality that listens to dead turtles, and more. Contemplating these questions now, when we still can, serves the peoples to come and responds creatively to the grief and longing of living and dying fully in our rapidly mutating home. Let’s not give
up out of fear, let’s not cling to nostalgic hope, let us stay with what is. Love this world.

Denaturalizing Nature

Much environmental thinking tends to agree upon a story to explain our ecological crises: the story of the dualistic severing of Human society from the Natural world. Whether deriving from Biblical notions of Man given dominion over other creatures, or ancient Greek devaluations of natural bodies in favor of rational ideas, there are various origin stories of the split between Human and Nature. Inheriting this split—the story goes—modern humanity conceived of itself as not just separate, but as the highest form of life on earth, justified in dominating all. There is a ground floor called Nature, and then an ascendent penthouse called Humanity. From these heights, the Humans enact an anthropocentrism which colonizes and objectifies the living planet, reducing it to mere dead resource. Such a diagnosis tends to lead to a proposed remedy: we must “reconnect with nature,” healing the dualistic division by descending back to the ground, and once again see Nature as an animate, living whole. This is a spiritual as well as a political task.

Despite its simplicity and familiarity, this Romantic environmentalist story cleaves to the very dualities that it seeks to overcome. It begins and ends with two reified and fragmented dimensions: one called Nature and the other called Human. We are then left asking about their relation and how the two may be harmoniously reunited or correlated.

However, as influential anthropologist Phillipe Descola reminds us, the idea that we live in a two-story building in which the bottom floor is Nature and the top floor is Human culture is not the only way to divide up reality. In his influential Beyond Nature and Culture, he writes, “the opposition between nature and culture is not as universal as it is claimed to be.” He shows that with people from the Amazon to the tundra of the far north to the Pacific islands, from the Gobi Desert of Mongolia to the plains of India, a dualism between Nature and Culture is not to be found. Almost no cultures even have a word comparable to the European ‘Nature.’ In the Buddhist traditions with which I am most familiar, for example, there is not an obviously analogous, single term or concept. The assumption that there is one dimension called Nature and another dimension called Culture or Human has prevented the acknowledgement of a “pluriversality” of worlds in which many humans live in relation with people known as plants, animals, mountains, and deserts. Descola seeks to “provincialize” the modern opposition between Nature and Culture. That is, to make it seem kind of quaint and unique to a specific, and strange
civilization called European modernity. A blunt way to say this might be “Na-
ture” is not natural: the concepts of Nature and Culture were concretized by modern Europeans. The Nature-Human binary is just one way of dividing up the world. Countless other ways abound.

Specifically, he names four other ways, or four other ontologies, based on the relation between interiority (mind, consciousness, soul) and physicality (bodies). First, we could have sameness of both interiority and physicality, and he calls this totemism. This would be an ontology in which human beings and non-human beings such as rock formations or reptiles share analogous physical bodies and interior ways of knowing, dissolving boundaries between human and non-human. Physical turtles could be our ancestors in totemism. Second, we could have differences in physical bodies but sameness of interiority, and he calls this animism. Here it is the animating soul or spirit that is shared across different bodies, allowing for humans to identify with the spirit of a peccary, a wooly monkey, or a dog. This again removes any two-part opposition between a realm called Nature and a realm called the Human: things are more fluid and shared. Third, some peoples express an ontology in which both interiority and physicality are different, and he calls this analogism. This is a worldview in which all bodies and beings are different, butmeaningfully related in a “great.

Finally, we have what Descola calls naturalism, which is the exclusive modern view that physical objects, plants, and animals “out there” are devoid of any interiority and only share with us physicality, or materiality. On top of Nature there is an additional phenomenon called Culture, which supposedly only Humans have. It is only this modern European view which presumes a definitive split between Nature and Culture.

I am rehearsing Descola’s research here to make a simple point: the idea that environmentalism should be based on “reuniting” Humanity with Nature operates from within the specific, modern European ontology which opposed two realms in the first place. Environmentalism then somehow wants to bring the two back together. By establishing the ecological task in this way, it also locks our language and thinking into the very binary that we presumed from the start. There is something “out there” called Nature which is the desert, the dead turtle shell, and a Palo Verde pod. Then there is something “in here” called the Human mind. We are left trying to “correlate” the two by bringing them back into harmony. But what if it is precisely this binary, and the very concept of Nature and “the natural” that is part of the endless violence modern civilization enacts on biosystems, waterways, and species? Is it true that the cause of our ecological suffering is because we have separated from something called Nature?
Other diagnoses of environmental ruin are also available. For example, we could instead show that the destruction of habitats is a result of capitalist practices that are too closely woven into our planet. As world-ecologist Jason Moore maintains, “Rather than separate humans from nature, capitalist civilization has enmeshed individual life-activity into a web of life whose interconnections are much denser, more geographically expansive, and more intimate than ever before.” That is, the ecological issue is not that Humanity has separated from Nature, but that modern civilization has enmeshed with the ecosphere with such increasing intimacy that the very bifurcation of Nature from Human is rendered inoperative. As economic drives swallow and liquify mineral and carbon deposits, remaining boreal forests, countless species of insects, and non-capitalist ways of life, the issue is not one of disconnection from the planet, but of a specific mode of fusion. Globalized, fossil-fuel based capitalism is too intimate with earth. This world-ecology perspective is quite distinct from the aspiration to re-unite human society with the natural world because it instead shows how capitalism is always part of the planetary metabolism and could never be separated from it. Perhaps the diagnosis of separation subtly plays into the idea that human actions are somehow autonomous and will not scar and desecrate the planet.

The colonialist practices and epistemes that have formed into our idea of Nature are part of the story of ecological violence. As Timothy Morton pronounced in Ecology without Nature, “Environmentalism worries that we are disconnected from the world. But what if one of the problems were this idea itself?”

The concepts of Nature and Human have a history. When we question the concept of Nature, we simultaneously see that there is no modern Human without the notion of a Natural background from which he (often presumed to be a white male) is distinguished. Similarly, there is no European Civilization without abjected colonized lands; black and brown peoples, images of Africa, the Americas, and the “Orient,” the slave trade, witch hunts, and the non-human animals, plantations, and mines from which the white European male was distinguished. As Moore states,

It’s no coincidence that our familiar words Nature, Society, and European all assumed their present-day meanings in the century or so after 1550; an era of brutal colonization in Ireland and the Americas, murderous witch hunts and the violent regulation of female bodies, the first great boom of the African slave trade, the neocolonial subordination of Poland, interminable warfare, the continental-scale reorganization of Andean life and work, rapid deforestation from Brazil...
to the Baltic, and the vigorous spread of sugar plantations across the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{21}

Dividing the world into substantial categories such as civilized versus uncivilized, Human versus Nature does not simply create a schism, it establishes and repeats those very concepts. Even attempts to reunite this fracture creates—and holds apart—Nature and Human as the two poles of the division. Yet these categories obscure the ways in which nearly every aspect of living and dying on planet earth is beyond this polarity.

The old language—Nature/Society—has become obsolete. Reality has overwhelmed the binary’s capacity to help us track the real changes unfolding, accelerating, amplifying before our eyes. And yet, a new language—one that comprehends the irreducibly dialectical relation between human and extra-human natures in the web of life—has yet to emerge.\textsuperscript{22}

Novel ecopolitical spiritualities become thinkable from within such a language yet to emerge, a language limning the wild edges of colonialism.\textsuperscript{23} Within such a language we will encounter a dead turtle or desert sands or even the water coming from our tap, free from carving up the world into a schism between Human and Nature. What fresh questions and stirrings might dawn if the diagnosis and remedy of ecological damage was different from the standard environmental story, a story that has been repeated for decades? What forms of eco-spirituality would remain without the category of Nature? These questions open-up communication with a dead turtle.

**Anxious Life Symptoms in the Anthropocene**

The geomaterial interconnections on planet earth are nearing their limit points. Climate feedback loops already set in motion, charred animals, floods, plastic-filled oceans, and virus-laden climate refugee camps: these form our anxious environmental visions in the Anthropocene—a proposed name for our geological age.\textsuperscript{24} The Anthropocene is a time in which human beings and our technologies are a decisive force on the planet, becoming materialized in the plastics, concrete dust, and radioactive traces now marking earth with an unerasable sedimentary layer. Because human forces shape and influence the entire planet, the Anthropocene “finds its most radical expression in our acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate.”\textsuperscript{25} Anthropogenic material impact could be read as a geological scar by those who come after us. With Jami Weinstein and
Claire Colebrook, we might wonder: *What questions would a being who arrives after humans have wanted us to pose today?*

Within the Anthropocene, there is so much dread, just barely covering grief. I cannot believe that the songbirds in my home are dying (North America has lost about three billion—more than a quarter—of its songbirds since 1970) and that 75 percent of coral reefs may die off in my lifetime. It can feel impossible to love what we are losing, and impossible not to. Object Relations psychology and trauma theory make it clear how much human beings require a loving and safe holding environment for our nervous systems. We need specific therapeutics if the very living systems of the planet are not experienced as supportive and trustworthy.

The immense timescale of our geological age is often invisible to us humans busying through the day, a barely noticed metamorphosis. Yet during global pandemics and with 74,000 square kilometres of eucalyptus forest in southeast Australia, the Pantanal and Amazon regions of Brazil, the Chouf area of Lebanon, taiga forests in Siberia, and huge swaths of the western US scorched or on fire, the presence of climatic transfiguration can at times erupt in felt experience. Two of my closest friends just lost their home in one of the largest fires in Californian history. The pressures of ecological ruin press upon nearly all facets of living and dying on planet earth, rippling through social bodies, economies, and the online news, saturating the very atmosphere of your morning anxiety, before you even open your eyes. This is an age of collective climate trauma.

Spiritual and psychological responses to this trauma are becoming increasingly necessary. Such responses should not merely be meant to ease our minds so that many of us can continue to perpetuate the systems and habits that created the disasters in the first place. They should instead be modes of healing that lead to material and radical reorientations. All-too-often, eco-spiritualities, eco-psychologies, and eco-dharmas are only focused on our inner, mental health within climate change, and fail to lead to concrete and rebellious, but also material changes. This, too, is a legacy of an opposition between Nature and Human: our spirituality tends to address the inner, human, mind side while abandoning the material Nature side to activism or politics. An ecopolitical spirituality that denaturalizes Nature might help to overcome a binary between the spiritual and the political, between psyche and lands, between the Human and Nature, not by “joining” the two but by living in such a way that a single existential, material tissue is our shared field of practice.

Increasingly hot and devasted ecosystems are the context in which politics, protest, and psychological experience now take place. Just as political geogra-
phies are “ecologized” by environmental disruptions, calling for a new climate politics, so our psychology and spirituality is ecologized, calling for new forms of political spirituality. Any contemporary spirituality that has not faced collective ecological trauma and opened itself to a corresponding transformation of its practices risks its own extinction.

But signs of good news abound in this realm, perhaps, as all around us new expressions of ecological spirituality surge forth. How many of us read the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Overstory*, or *Braiding Sweetgrass*, or *The Hidden Life of Trees* and experienced a palpable shift in perspective, a sense of the animacy and intelligence of the living natural world of which we are a small part? Not only do we love this earth, but earth is alive and loves us back. New expressions of animism and vitalism are now thinkable for modern people, supported in part by the popularization of biological research into the intelligence and emotional life of moss, mycelium, and maples. At the crucial Oceti Sakowin Standing Rock encampment, water protectors cried out “water is life, mní wicíni.” Resisting the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline braided inseparably with the Sioux women’s early morning water offering to the river. Ecological spiritualities of life emerge in relation with ecological politics.

Life and animacy, like Nature, are defining categories through which to organize thought and action today, so I will hereon capitalize Life as I have capitalized Nature and Human. A “turn to Life” is visible in philosophical vitalism, panpsychism, and feminist new materialism, as well as what is known as the ontological turn in anthropology. For example, this is a conclusion from Jane Bennett’s influential *Vibrant Matter*: “One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world.” Notice how the two poles of the binary are subsumed within a story of pervasive vitalism: that we are non-human means that we are pervaded by and dependent upon non-human actors (the bacteria in our guts, an electric grid, etc.) and that the things in the world are vital actors, rather than simply dead matter. Things are alive.

Concern with the figure of Life is also evident in critical political accounts of “biopolitics” (a politics of life) in which power is conceived as operating through the control, organization, and optimization of populations—the power “to make live and let die,” as Foucault wrote. By attending to issues such as health, reproduction, and disease security, state and corporate power claim their legitimacy through securing Life.

I see this concern with Life as an extension of the binary opposition between Nature and Human. That is, the story of dualistic separation presumes that Humans have forgotten that Nature is alive and animate. Therefore, by rediscovering the animacy of the earth and all Life, we can help reconnect Hu-
manity with Nature. One of the aims of this essay is to show how even these turns to Life might be reappropriated by dominant capitalism.

Radically emplaced ecopolitical spiritualities are often described as forms of *neo-animism*, in the sense that they see all things—water, mushroom, rock, shark, and raven—as alive, sentient, and sacred. Graham Harvey distinguishes between an older animism defined in colonial anthropological literature as a belief in spirits, on the one hand, and those who use animism “as a shorthand reference to their efforts to re-imagine and redirect human participation in the larger-than-human, multi-species community,” on the other.36 Furthermore, these neo-animisms are often synced-up with a decolonial politics, anti-racist environmental justice, and a concern to learn from Indigenous knowledges.

Yet there is a risk that the new animist ecologies of today are both symptom and diagnosis of the complex scale of entangled, ecological traumas mentioned above. As is so often the case, ethical and spiritual imagination may coil around a fantasy: at precisely the moment when late capitalist human beings have unleashed irreversible damage upon the very ecosystems that sustain us, these Humans suddenly (re)discover that “nature is alive” and that we are in love with the living earth community! I find this beautiful and sad, in part because this way of sensing the living world rings true for me. Yet why is this epiphany, experienced in different ways for millennia, dawning in late capitalist society today? Is it a timely revelation of ecological insight at the very moment when we most need it? Or is it the supplement of a fantasy, a traumatic response to help ease our hearts as we try to love what we are losing? I question if this turn to Life materially changes the direction of global capitalist civilization, and am concerned that it may be a coping mechanism for the destruction in which our everyday lives are entangled.

The Animist in the Desert

Let’s explore how this unfolds in another desert location. Two Women Sitting Down is a rock formation sacred to various Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territory of Australia.37 In 2013, the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority won a lawsuit against mining company OM Manganese Ltd. for significantly damaging the sacred site. The ontological status of these rocks, and the related cluster of economic, legal, and metaphysical questions, provides the perfect opportunity for theorist and anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli to question the power relations of “settler late liberalism” (her term for the dominant arrangement of power today).38 Is this rock formation animate and alive? Who owns the site and who owns the ways of thinking that determine how to understand Life and nonlife? The answers to such questions matter.
To this day, the conception that a rock formation might be alive has little power against a mining company’s rights. Some of the Aboriginal people Povinelli works with see manganese as the “blood” of Two Women Sitting Down. In fact, it is possible that manganese mined near Two Women Sitting Down shipped to China in 2009 caused 1,300 children to suffer extreme lead poisoning from breathing toxic air from a Chinese manganese smelting factory.

Povinelli describes the tactics and strategies through which these people have navigated “the cramped spaces” of colonialist capitalist occupation, while still maintaining a world in which Two Women Sitting Down might bleed, speak, and listen. In this sense, Povinelli is concerned with the perdurance of a non-modern metaphysics that challenges the Human/Nature Life/Nonlife binaries, right within settler capitalist occupation.

Yet Povinelli is wary to simply associate this Indigenous metaphysics with the popular neo-animism and vitalism in contemporary theory. To describe the global forms of power that operate today, she names three figures: the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. The Desert is the figure of inert Nonlife, death, and desertification. The Animist represents Life and animacy. The Virus stands for the tense relationship between both Life and Nonlife. I will focus on the Animist. We should clarify in advance that Povinelli’s figure of the Animist does not stand in for actual Indigenous spiritualities. Instead, it represents a facet of power and imagination in today’s settler late liberalism. This Animist also stands for the vital materialisms of today’s theory.

The Animist represents the attempt to blur any distinction between Life and nonlife by claiming that anything has the potential to be vital. Nonlife is not death; it is that which is not vital; it is extinction as well as the time before there was a split between life and death. Undoing the schism between life and death, the Animist conquers nonlife by expanding Life everywhere. “The new animism is extending Life into all entities and assemblages.”

Today’s capitalism animates the world by transforming everything into commodities. Paradoxically, this is the opposite of the expected sense in which we see capitalism as the killer and destroyer of life. Instead, power comes from claiming to foster thriving and Life. Think of greenwashing. Many corporations today—even climate destroying fossil-fuel companies—want to appear Green and present themselves with images of resilient communities, clean skies, lush green meadows, etc. To support this animating tendency, capitalist ideologies claim images that align with Life. The Animist is a figure who wants to bring everything to life, to see value in the world as green, resilient, and animate.

Such capitalist animism devalues vast stretches of this cosmos that are not about human life or Green life or growing profits. In other words, manganese has no voice and no agency of its own within capitalist Animism. It is not
allowed to be nonlife: the rocks are forced into familiar senses of Life and profit-value. Today’s environmental spirituality may be in part a traumatic symptom of late settler power, seeking to bring everything into what we Humans value, protecting us from the Desert. The Animist doesn’t simply widen the circle of animacy, but suppresses a fear:

The Animist says, Life no longer needs to face its terror—the lifeless, the inert, and the void of being—because we can simply refuse to acknowledge the existence of any form of being other than our own… we can saturate Being with familiar and reassuring qualities.43

In this way, capitalist animism might seize upon a beautiful longing for a living world and distort it by means of our fear of what exceeds the familiar. Like many of the most profound apophatic mysticisms, ecological spirituality should include nonlife and the “void of being,” bravely extending beyond Green comforts, facing our fear. When listening for elemental communication from the land to help guide humanity in the years to come, how do we not force the desert and the dead turtle shell into the categories of Life that are mere familiar products of the lifestyles to which we have become accustomed? Our earth is not just alive; it is also death and nonlife.

Finally, this same fear that seeks to animate all of being can turn back towards our own bodies. Although I will not have space to fully explore his thinking here, I want to at least gesture towards philosopher and postcolonial theorist Joseph-Achille Mbembe’s observation that a feature of late capitalism is its “return to animism.” Mbembe has recently warned against the ways that capitalist animism forces modern peoples to subjectify themselves by animating themselves, turning human bodies and spiritualities into commodities.

Radioactive Concrete Turtle

Let’s learn from another dead turtle shell. After dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, bringing an end to World War II, and initiating the Cold War, the US infamously exploded 67 nuclear and thermonuclear blasts in Bikini Atoll, the Marshall Islands, between 1946 and 1958. Radioactivity, nuclear debris, displaced indigenous residents, contaminated coastal seas and fisheries still haunt the islands. Entirely obliterating four of the 40 islands that make up Enewetak Atoll, nuclear blasts also left two gaping craters on Runit Island. As Karen Barad tells the tale:

In the late 1970s, the US government, in the process of washing its hands of the radioactive mess they left in the Marshall Islands, did a rudimentary “clean up.” Four thousand US servicemen were de-
ployed to the Marshall Islands to do the dirty work, which included putting hundreds of pieces of plutonium, the debris of a detonation gone wrong, into plastic bags and throwing them into the crater, along with other nuclear debris from the tests. This constituted a “cleanup” of approximately 0.8 percent of the total radioactive waste. The servicemen had no protective gear or education about handling nuclear waste. The crater, which is made of coral, a very porous material, was then covered over by a dome of concrete.45

This farce of a cleanup left behind a 377-foot 18-inch-thick dome comprised of rectangular and square segments. Uncannily, the dome looks like a giant, dead concrete turtle shell.

In part because of their long lifespans and in part because of their diet of sea algae and grasses that bioaccumulate radioactivity, the sea turtles around the Marshall Islands carry extremely toxic traces of radioactivity. People native to these islands have abandoned eating turtles and many sea creatures, often living instead off Spam and other prepackaged meats shipped in from outside.46

Sea turtles are also sacred to many islanders and in some places are considered taboo, to be eaten only by priests as a food of the gods. Sea turtles can swim both above and below the water and are therefore seen to transcend the boundaries between worlds, and between life and death.47 Sometimes playing a totemic role as way to organize human society, turtles cross between the sea and social life and feature prominently in Marshall Island political traditions and arts.

The non-natural ecopolitical spiritualities to come might listen to, attend to, and attune to the teaching of a concrete turtle shell as much as attuning to the moon, an old growth forest, or a raven. What are the spiritual teachings of this radioactive sculpture marking the Anthropocene, a materialized metaphor for the injustices that poison the waterscapes, islands, and deserts of planet earth, the traces of war, the turtle-shaped child of our atomic age?

Turtle at the End

Around the time I began work on this essay, my family and I traveled to Sandbridge Island in Virginia. One day, as we sat on the beach, we saw what looked like a large clump of dark seaweed floating just beyond the waves crashing ashore. One of us swam out and pulled it in. As we walked closer to have a look, I saw that it was a massive, dead sea turtle. Before it died, the turtle must have been many decades old. A huge crack in the turtle’s coppery, dark brown-jade shell exposed soft, cream-colored flesh flowing out into the sea, most likely struck by a metal boat propeller strong enough to shatter the old plated dome.
The flat, curved flippers moved gently as the waves washed around the turtle, making the dead body appear to swim. Also moving with the waves, the turtle’s large black neck like a fleshy accordion gave the further impression of being alive. Yet this turtle was dead. Never completely washing back to sea, as the huge turtle drifted down the beach, we could hear children shouting for their parents to come look. Rather than remove the turtle in some way, we thought it best to let this dead, shelled body continue to teach the humans vacationing on the sea…

Following the teachings of these dead turtles, we could draw out a few possible (dis)orientations for an emerging ecopolitical spirituality:

- It is a time to love the earth as it is and is it changes, not merely as we wish to remember it;
- The categories and the relations between Nature, Life, and the Human are remnants from a colonial metaphysics that is metamorphosizing in the Anthropocene;
- The framework of “reconnecting” the Human and Nature may no longer serve ecopolitical spirituality today;
- Ecopolitical spiritualities should participate in material transformations, not simply “inner” change;
- Spiritual responses arise in part as a symptom of collective ecological trauma. Sensitive to the ways in which fantasy might suppress rather than heal this trauma, we should see how power appropriates our longing and grief in new formations;
- Emerging spiritualities such as neo-animism could learn from theoretical critiques of capitalist animism;
- If our ecopolitical spiritual approaches seek only the Green life that is familiar to modern consumer humans, we would do better to attend to the nonlife that makes up much of our universe, not just the universe-for-us.\(^{46}\)

The above is part of a new language in which spirituality is materially situated in the existential tissue called earth: an earth that is not Nature.

So how might we cultivate ecopolitical spiritualities free from capitalist animism and Natural Life? How might we learn from the teachings of dead turtles?

I will not attempt to directly answer such questions here at the end, instead trusting that some of what I have written might open the way for different, and perhaps non-natural modes of ecopolitical spirituality, contaminated by the miraculous planet as it is. Instead, I will close by describing a slight mutation
of an elemental practice adapted from the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition, to exemplify how the critique and possibilities offered above might be practicable. I aspire to develop this hint further.

Try going out to a source of polluted or clean water in the middle of your city or out on the land near where you live. Sit near the water source, audible sewer system, waste-water recycling plant, or contaminated flowing river; close your eyes and listen to the sound and let it saturate your awareness. Feel the flow of water in your own body, veins, and organs. When you are there, find and toss small smooth rocks, clods of clay, or broken asphalt, back and forth. Close your eyes and listen to their sound as they slap against your palm. Gaze at rocks, pavement, concrete, or glass buildings—whatever is around—and breathe softly; touch their materiality and sense the solidity of earth, analogous to your own bones. Then, perhaps at another place, stare into a fire, furnace, or a methane flare from a fracking well and feel its heat inside you, analogous to the warmth of your own body. Later, lay on your back in a field, a rooftop, or in a park when the sun is behind you and stare into the open blue sky, or the smog and smoke-filled firmament, letting your breath dissolve out into the vastness, like the spaciousness of your mind at ease.

And here is a key point: engage these practices without the categories of Nature, Human, or Life; release any notion of a “pure nature;” free yourself of the sense that there are two opposed and distinct entities called Nature and Human that need to merge; suspend the sense that society or culture are severed from ecosystems. Let go of the concept that all is either alive or dead. Rest in the potent, elemental freedom from the categories that have defined modern industrial civilization. Listen and feel the material trace that remains. Hear the teachings of the dead turtles.

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currently developing what he calls “four fields” of contemplative practices for potential worlds.

Notes


2. Correlationism is the term coined by speculative realist philosopher Quentin Meillasoux to refer to philosophies that follow from Kant’s division of the noumenal world (which is “really out there” for itself), from the phenomenal world, (which is the world as experienced and perceived “by humans”). Some contemporary philosophy rejects the trap of this correlationism and attempts to speculate on the real itself. For a good overview, see Graham Harman, *Speculative Realism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018). Timothy Morton’s ecological philosophy comes from a speculative realist intuition, see *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).


5. On the concepts of ‘untouched nature’ and ‘wild’ see Gary Snyder’s seminal essay, “The Etiquette of Freedom” in *The Practice of the Wild* (NY: North Point Press, 1990) as well as Cronon’s critique, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” in Cronon ed., *Uncommon Ground*, in which he historicizes the ideal of the wild within Romantic and American images of the sublime and the frontier. See also Rebecca Solnit’s *Savage lands…* As I wrote this sentence a yellow butterfly flew all around my computer.
9. Ibid.
16. Here I am invoking both Giorgio Agamben’s notion of living contemplation (see *The Use of Bodies*), as well as Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).
22. Ibid., 16
returning-the-gift, Donna Haraway: *Staying with the Trouble*, and Andreas Malm and Alf Hornberg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review*, 1, no 1: 62-69. There are numerous alternative proposed terms which may be more accurate, (Capitalocene, Plantationocene, and Cthulucene). I appreciate Anna L. Tsing’s suggestion that the term Anthropocene is useful if it opens perspectives and inspires conversations, which it does.


27. This may not only be a modern issue within the Anthropocene, for we need not presume that non-modern cultures experience ecosystems as supportive and trustworthy: they may seem unstable, violent, and threatening.


29. I do not want to claim that the distinctions between Nature/Human and Outer/Inner are identical. There are certainly some non-modern and non-European philosophies that distinguish between Inner and Outer that do not uphold the strong Human/Nature binary, as is evident for example, in much of Indian philosophy. Nonetheless, I see a kind of family resemblance between a Cartesian duality which bifurcates the cogito from the res extensa and the notion of the Human subject separated from, and dominant over, the outer Natural world. For a thorough description of psychology embedded in the natural world, see Andy Fischer, *Radical Ecopsychology*.


37. Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016). Povinelli has lived in community with numerous Aboriginal groups, especially
those of Belyuen in the Northern Territory.

38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 31
40. Ibid., 44
41. Ibid., 34.
42. This is close to Adrian Parr’s Foucauldian concept of Green governmentality in Adrian Parr, *Birth of a New Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) 41.
43. Ibid., 55
47. Ibid., 136.
48. This is perhaps but an extension of the original insight of Deep Ecology: ecology is not just about human well-being but the value inherent in the earth.
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