BACK TO EARTH: REFLECTIONS ON ECOLOGICAL HOSPITALITY

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This essay proposes a paradigm shift in the way humans relate to the earth as hosts and guests. It explores the possibility of a radical ecological hospitality following the phenomenological writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard and the eco-feminist insights of Mary Robinson and Catherine Keller. Such an ecological conversion signals a shift from the Anthropocene of human domination of nature to a symbiocene of deep interdependency and vital entanglement between human and other-than-human life forms.

Un changement de paradigme s'impose si nous voulons considérer la terre comme un hôte qui nourrit plutôt que comme une marchandise à consommer. Pour qu'un véritable changement se produise, nous devons entendre le cri de la terre et adopter une hospitalité écologique radicale à l'égard de tous les êtres vivants. Car, au fond, nous sommes à la fois des hôtes et des invités de la terre, des récepteurs et des émetteurs incarnés. Un tel changement nous obligerait à passer de l'Anthropocène de la domination humaine implacable – qui nous a conduits au bord de la catastrophe climatique – à un Symbiocène de l'interdépendance profonde entre les humains et les non-humains.

A paradigm shift is needed if we are to see the earth as a host that nurtures rather than a commodity to be consumed. For real change to occur, we must heed the cry of the earth and embrace a radical ecological hospitality toward all living beings. For we are, deep down, guests of the earth as well as hosts, receivers as well as perceivers. Such a shift would require us to move from the Anthropocene of relentless human domination—which has brought us to the brink of climate catastrophe—to a Symbiocene of deep interdependency between humans and nature. It is time for the *anthropos*, defined by Plato in the *Cratylus* (229c) as the being who looks up and away from nature, to rediscover its primal belonging as *symbiosis*: humans living together with other-than-human species in mutual dependency.

The Greek term *symbiosis* translates into Latin as *convivium*, "living together." This idea of ecological hospitality, based on a paradigm shift from the Anthropocene to a new Symbiocene, is adumbrated in a number of contemporary conversations about the "symbiotic" interaction between human and more-than-human beings. The pioneering nature writer Richard Louv diagnoses a deep "Nature Deficit Disorder" in the Anthropocene. He writes of an acute "species loneliness," evidenced by a growing ecological dissociation and provoking "touch hunger" to return to our fundamental being-with-nature, in fidelity to what Louv terms the "reciprocity principle" of mutual interspecies belonging.[1] In similar vein, philosopher of science Michel Serres calls for a radically new "natural contract." "We must," he argues, "add to the exclusively social contract a natural contract of symbiosis and reciprocity in which our relationship to things would set aside mastery and possession in favour of admiring attention, reciprocity, contemplation, and respect; where knowledge

[1] Richard Louv deploys the distinction between Anthropocene and Symbiocene in *The Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals Can Save Our Lives and Save Theirs* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2019). The term Symbiocene was coined by Glenn Albrecht 2011 and developed in his pioneering work of eco-philosophy, *Earth Emotion: New Words for a New World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019). The term Symbiocene refers to a possible, imminent future where humans and nature are re-integrated in relations of mutual enhancement. The compound word combines *symbiosis* (living together or companionship) and *cene*, which means era or age. The recent practical interpretation of the word refers to a vision of a sustainable future in which human beings interact with their environment in a more vital and collaborative way. Symbiosis is key to the flourishing of life on the earth, informing how we relate to the basic elements of air, food, water, and interspecies natural relations. See my discussion of this theme in Richard Kearney, *Touch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 109–11.

would no longer imply property, nor action mastery." What is needed is "an armistice contract in the objective war, a contract of symbiosis, for a symbiont recognizes the host's rights, whereas a parasite—which is what we are now—condemns to death the one he pillages and inhabits, not realizing that in the long run he's condemning himself to death too."[2]

For her part, Catherine Keller, a disciple of Alfred Whitehead's process philosophy, offers an eco-ontological reading of the Anthropocene, noting that *convivium*, the Latin for *symbiosis*, commonly means "feast." "The primal eucharist of life," she ventures, "seems to find its genesis less in competition than in collaboration."[3] Drawing on the research of biologist Lynne Margulis, Keller discusses the function of a wide range of "scientific symbioses" demonstrating the "elemental relationalism of microorganisms." Margulis spoke of an "interactive tissue of microbacteria converting the planet in a heretofore unknown layer of symbiosis" and possibly "explaining the evolution of life as an original, cooperative act of mutually constitutive relation called *symbiogenesis*." This refers orignally to a relation of feeding: "[B]ut the imbibing of a single cell by another did not kill the first but enfolded it in a new creation—and so gave rise to complexity: the organism."[4] Symbiogenesis is a protoword for natural hospitality—ranging from the biological to the ecological—in so far as it designates a primordial activity of collaboration between creatures great and small, from the microscale of tiny organisms to the macroscale of the universe. Adapting Cusanus's ontology of *explicatio* and *implicatio*, Keller adumbrates an ecological dialectic of mutual mirroring of hosting and guesting, unfolding and enfolding. She suggests that such a primal dialectic of symbiosis may encourage us to replace the anthropocentric dualism of separate substances (*e.g.*, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*) with a dynamic hospitality of interactive becoming and belonging. So that particles, molecules and cells—and each individual animal or plant composed of them—can be read as an "actual occasion constituted of its relations to all its others...a contraction of its universe from a unique perspective: it enfolds its universe and unfolds it differently."[5] Symbiogenesis may thus be said to convene the opposites of identity and difference, unity and multi-

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[2] Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 38.
[3] Catherine Keller, *The Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 157.
[4] *Ibid.*, 175.
[5] *Ibid.*, 175–77.

plicity—the physical universe mirroring the metaphysical in a hospitable interplay of one and many.

In *On Translation,* Paul Ricœur speaks of "linguistic hospitality" as an act of translation between host and guest languages. The art of hospitality as translation is to find the right balance between imposing one's host language on the guest or submitting to the language of the host such that one renounces one's identity as guest.[6] Applied to our current ecological crisis, this would mean that human and non-human nature discover a proper reciprocal relationship of action and passion, learning to become (as perhaps we were in the beginning) both hosts and guests of the earth. But what might this entail at an everyday level? In her recent book, *Climate Justice*, Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, urges us not to succumb to despair but to embrace a number of basic tasks. First, we have the *moral* task of making the climate crisis count in our everyday lives (*e.g.*, responsible production and consumption: recycle, reuse, and refuse pollutant energies). Second, we have the *political* response of righteous indignation toward those in positions of power who are not doing what they should—public advocacy and protest. And third, we have the *practical* task of supporting NGOs, multilateral civil societies, and other organizations creating grassroots green teams working for change. The last of these reminds us that we are all in this together. When it comes to sharing our endangered environment, we are irrevocably interconnected, whether we like it or not. And this calls for a fourth step—a *pedagogical* commitment to foster urgent philosophical conversations about what needs to be done: an act of "conscientization" regarding the mutual interdependency between humans and non-humans. These four tasks call for a transition to a Symbiocene of radical interspecies hospitality, based on practices of environmental justice and solidarity. A move that requires that we cease being victims of apocalypse and become instead "prisoners of hope."[7]

In the beginning was symbiosis; and the earth can still be our teacher if we acknowledge it as host and ourselves as guests—and the other way round. Nature offers us many examples of such symbi-

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[6] Paul Ricœur, *On Translation*, (tr.) E. Brennan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 23f. See also Ricœur, "Linguistic Hospitality: The Risk of Translation," in *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action*, (ed.) R. Kearney and M. Fitzpatrick (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 17–24.

[7] Mary Robinson, *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience and the Fight for a Sustainable Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); see also my conversation with Mary Robinson in "On Climate Justice," in *Hosting Earth: Facing the Climate Crisis*, (ed.) R. Kearney, P. Klapes, and U. Hameed (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024).

otic mutualism, which epitomizes the principle and practice of what I am calling "ecological hospitality." Trees, for example, offer us a perennial paradigm of how symbiosis operates. They flourish and communicate by using subterranean fungal networks, which channel the flow of life resources and information throughout forests. This phenomenon of interaction is confirmed by the research of Suzanne Simard and other environmental scientists, showing how forests have "mother trees" or large interconnecting hubs whose underground mycorrhizal relationships contribute to forest resiliency, adaptability, and survival.[8] This primal instance of arboreal hospitality has major implications for how to manage and heal forests from human harm, most notably the climate damage brought about by the worst excesses of the Anthropocene—to wit, modernity's determination to exploit nature, reducing living things to commodities of consumption and exchange. Our voluntarist anthropocentrism was epitomized by René Descartes's boast that "man is master and possessor of nature";[9] and it finds symptomatic expression in the rapacious food, fashion, and fossil industries of our industrial market economies.

In contrast to this top-down hegemonic model, let us consider more closely the mutual hospitality of the symbiotic alternative. At the most infinitesimal level of nature, mycorrhizal fungi live in reciprocal relationship with plants. The fungi serve as root extensions which transmit water and other basic nutrients for survival, while plants furnish the fungi with sugars in return. Beeches and birches, for instance, could not communicate without such complex mycorrhizal interactions. Indeed, recent scientific data reveals that 90 percent of all known plants grow in association with fungi, a symbiotic practice of hospitality going back 400 million years. This mutual

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[8] See Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (London: Penguin, 2021); and the very influential novel by Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: Norton, 2018), inspired by her work. These stories of arboreal symbiosis and reciprocity are echoed in the old childhood ditty, "I see the trees and the trees see me." See my film for the "Hosting Earth" project, "How the Trees See Us," Guestbook Project (2022), streaming video, [https://guestbookproject.org/howthetreesseeus]. This experience of a bilateral mirroring between humans and nature is powerfully captured in Merleau-Ponty's description of the reversible dialectic between seer and seen in "Eye and Mind," in *The Primacy of Perception*, (ed.) J. M. Edie, (tr.) W. Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167. For more on Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenology of chiasmic double sensation, see note 23 below.

[9] René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode* (Leiden: Ian Maire, 1637), VI; my translation.

interdependency signals an underground matrix of collaboration, commonly known as the Wood Wide Web (WWW). And fully understanding how these terrestrial ecosystems operate—with fungi serving as critical decomposers and recomposers of life matter—is crucial to appreciating the importance of biodiversity for the survival of our planet. Without it the world's continental landmasses would become devoid of forests, crops, and grasslands. There would be no sustenance for living creatures, human or non-human alike.[10]

In multiple wisdom traditions, trees embody a medial space between land and sky, considered a middle world connecting the earth beneath our feet and the air above our heads. They serve as expiring arboreal hosts to inspiring human guests—natural examples of ecological hospitality. The Buddha, for example, achieved enlightenment by breathing in harmony with the Bodhi Tree. The Chinese Cosmic Man, P'an Ku, was shrouded in arboreal leaves. Christ enacted the death-life cycle by offering himself to the world on a tree grown from the root of Jesse.[11] Indeed, one of the seminal motifs of all world religions is the "Great mother and her symbol, the Tree," epitomized by a certain indigenous belief in the "bush soul" that becomes incarnate in living plants, which in turn host and protect humans as guests.[12] This panpsychist belief is still held by many

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[10] See the review essay by Elizabeth Kolbert, "Spored to Death," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 70, no. 14 (Sept. 21, 2023), 42–43; reviewing Allison Pouliot, *Meetings with Remarkable Mushrooms: Forays with Fungi Across Hemispheres* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023). See also the pioneering research by Michael Pollan on what might be called psychedelic symbiosis, *How to Change Your Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

[11] See the rood-tree of Christ blazing with animals, birds, and plants, sprouting from the root of Jesse in the altar crucifix hanging in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. See also Michael Kearney on the Buddha's enlightenment while breathing under the bodhi tree, *Becoming Forest* (Easton Studio Press, 2023); Mircea Eliade's treatment of the tree as a mythological and ritual *axis mundi* in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, (tr.) R. Sheed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); and Gaston Bachelard's reflections on the tree as an archetype of integration between the worlds of earth and sky in *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie*, (tr.) C. Gaudin (Washington: Spring Publications, 2005), 84f.

[12] Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Dell, 1968), 6–7, 69. This involved what Jung called a "mystical participation" or "unconscious identification" with living things, human and inhuman. "If the bush soul is a tree, the tree is presumed to have something like parental authority over the individual concerned.... An injury to the bush soul is considered an injury to the man" (*ibid.*, 7), and vice versa. On this and related themes of eco-psychology and eco-phenomenology, see David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the more than Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996); David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 2010);

indigenous people today, as Native American elder Lisa Wahpepah reminds us in "Listening to the Earth":

> When one thinks of the Earth like a mother...living creatures are seen as life givers. They nurture us and give us everything to live, not just physically, but also mentally and emotionally. That is why all living beings are our relations, not only the two-legged but the four-legged, the winged, the insects, the finned that live in the ocean, the trees, the plankton, the flowers. It is everything, all my relations. *Mitakuye Oyasin.* When we understand our intimate relationship with the Earth we are in touch with what the Earth gives to us."[13]

But few of us live in that symbiotic relationship today, as the foreboding clouds of climate change darken our skies. We have become "disconnected" from our elemental relation to the earth, no longer acknowledging her as mother. Lisa's fellow elder, Wolf Wahpepah, adds this moving and candid caution:

> The natural world, the Earth, regards all life and wants to give life. It is not a destroyer. It is a creator. We're the ones who have thrown the life cycle off balance to such an extent that now we threaten the organism that sustains all life. At some point in time Mother Earth has to decide how much can be salvaged because she has to make sure that life itself is not extinguished. If she has to make decisions or cause consequences that make it less habitable for us in order to diminish our negative impact...she will.

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and Erazim Kohák, *The Green Halo: A Bird's-Eye View of Ecological Ethics* (Peru, Illinois: Open Court, 2000).

[13] Lisa Wahpepah and Wolf Wahpepah in conversation with Michael Kearney, "Listening to the Earth," in Kearney, Klapes, and Hameed, *Hosting Earth*, 220; originally recorded on the Guestbook Project [https://guestbookproject.org/listening-to-the-earth/]. The Lakota phrase *Mitákuye Oyás'iŋ* describes reality by addressing it as "All My Relations." All humans, all animals, all plants, all the waters, the soil, the stones, the mountains, the grasslands, the winds, the clouds and storms, the sun and moon, stars and planets are our relations and are relations to one another. Brian McKlaren describes a similar vision of multilateral symbiotic interdependency (rather than vertical hierarchy): "We aren't ruling from the heights of a great top-down pyramid (as) generals under King God in the divine chain of command. We aren't given by our rank a carte blanche to dominate, oppress, exploit and exterminate everything below us. No, we aren't at the top of anything; we're simply at the tip of one small branch of a very huge, verdant tree, and all created things are our grandparents, cousins and siblings." Brian McKlaren, *The Gallapagos Islands: A Spiritual Journey* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 214.

> Any mother would. And that is why it is better to think of her as a mother as opposed to objectifying her. The earth is not *like* our mother, It *is* our Mother. And how you care for your mother is how you should care for the earth.[14]

This traditional Indigenous wisdom prefigures Rilke's poetic hypothesis that "if we surrendered / to earth's intelligence / we could rise up rooted, like trees."[15]

Another vocal exponent of ecological hospitality is the Indigenous scientist Robin Kimmerer, a nature writer of the Potawatomi nation and professor of Environmental Biology at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. In her influential book *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), she celebrates the Indigenous agricultural practice of the Three Sisters: namely, three alimentary seeds which grow in symbiotic harmony. "Together these plants—corn, beans and squash—feed the land, and feed our imaginations, telling us how we might live."[16] Indeed, the Potawatomi language construes most of the

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[14] Wahpepah and Wahpepah, "Listening to the Earth," 224. Wolf Wahpepah adds this story from his native Iroquois tradition:

> The Great Peacemaker was shown a vision of the Tree of Peace where he saw that the diversity of the people could still be unified. And even though there were sub-groups and many tribes, the Creator showed him that they could form a union like a tree growing with different branches. And these different branches would be the different nations of people that lived, all joined by one trunk, and that if they were in proper relationship to one another in a system that wasn't vulnerable to corruption, that it would be a system based on fairness. By incorporating and adopting more and more tribes, his intention was to literally end all warfare on the North American Continent, on Turtle Island. (*Ibid.*, 224–25)

See also Randy Woodley on the sustained ecological hope of Indigenous communities in North America:

> Their real hope recognizes that Earth endures and that we can still do enough to reverse the damage done. After all, the Earth is much stronger and more resilient than any human being. Although human beings are a part of the Earth, we may be the most expendable. This gives me pause—as well as a much longer view of our history and our future. I think Mother Earth is going to be alright in the end. I just hope we will be here long enough to see it. Although it might make us feel pretty insignificant, another way to turn the phrase is this: "We are still here ... for now. But the Earth remains forever.

Randy Woodley, *Becoming Rooted: One Hundred Days of Reconnecting with Sacred Earth* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 57–58.

[15] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, 100th anniversary ed., (tr.) A. Barrows and J. Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 171.

[16] Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 128–40.

world as a composite interaction between species, using verbs rather than nouns. The mountain is not a fixed object amongst objects but a way of becoming a mountain. A "mountaining" in eco-communion with neighboring ways of "treeing" and "skying" and "rivering" and "wolfing." Only things fabricated by human subjects are called objects—the rest are animate beings deserving reverence and respect. Which is not to deny that nature can be "naturing" in multiple ways. While nourishing us, it also harbours shadows and sufferings, decomposition as well as growth, death drives as well as life drives, all convening in a complex interplay of forces.[17]

The interspecies paradigm espoused by such Indigenous thinking does not mean a regressive return to the past. On the contrary, it is very much in keeping with contemporary research in the sciences. It is no accident that nature writers like Kimmerer and Simard are both professional scientists and animists. Moreover, their writings about the work of symbiosis in nature chime felicitously with some of the keenest observations of astrophysics. What works on the ground is echoed in the skies. Take, for example, the phenomenon of cosmic eco-hospitality at work in the earth's upper atmosphere or ionosphere which acts like the membrane of a cell, keeping harmful matter and excess radiation out and allowing warmth and light in. The earth's magnetic envelope is analogous to a breathing in and out of energies while the "habitable zones" of planets operate in terms of an interdependency of external conditions (the distance from a star, the mass of the planet, the presence of atmosphere) and internal conditions (the preservation of habitats suitable for life). Similarly, our solar system itself involves actions of dynamic equilibrium

[17] The earth is a process of dying as well as living, of waste, pain, and putrefaction as well as wellness and growth. It comprises a complex holistic ecosystem harbouring predators as well as nurturers, viruses as well as vitamins, parasites as well as hosts. The cycle of life-death (*eros-thanatos*) is integral to nature, as it is to our unconscious psyches, and we can only fully care for the earth when we integrate the shadow as well as the light. Symbiosis holds both. Hence the need to avoid sentimentalizing nature—casting it in idealized images—or demonizing it with fearful fantasies. Nature remains, deep down, an unknowable enigma, at best a numinous mystery. Brian Treanor observes the deep perplexity of many nature writers—*e.g.*, Henry David Thoreau, Nan Shepherd, Annie Dillard—before these complex paradoxes of natural life. See Treanor, "Preserving the Wilderness Idea," *Hedgehog Review*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2024): 125–33; and Treanor, "Thinking like a Jaguar: Carnal Hermeneutics, Touch and the Limits of Language," in *Anacarnation: Returning to the Body with Richard Kearney*, (ed.) B. Treanor and J. Taylor (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 1–11.

which take the form of cosmic interdependency.[18] And what is true of astrophysics is equally true of the life sciences, which, as we noted above, attest to the existence of multiple ecosystems of reciprocal interaction, known, as noted earlier, as "symbiogenesis."

It is curious how many contemporary scientists of matter have sought out conversations with some of the world's great spiritual leaders—think of David Bohm's exchanges with Krishnamurti, the Dalai Lama's dialogues with Harvard neurologists, Pope Francis's engagement with environmental scientists in *Laudato Si*. Indeed, such exchanges suggest that the four steps of ecological hospitality outlined by Mary Robinson—personal, moral, political, and pedagogical—may invite a fifth "spiritual" dimension. One does not have to look as far as astrophysics or comparative theology, however, for fundamental paradigms of symbiotic hospitality. It is to be found in the act of breathing itself. We inhale oxygen produced by leaves which receive the carbon dioxide exhaled from our lungs. Every rising and falling breath participates in an exchange between our body and plants, mutually releasing and receiving chemical properties crucial for our respective flourishing. Each inhalation and exhalation embodies a reciprocal flow—simple, involuntary, ubiquitous, the most basic act of life from birth to death. Human hemoglobin and chlorophyll molecules in leaves are virtually identical, except that in hemoglobin the carbon rings encircle a molecule of iron, giving blood its red colour, while in chlorophyll the very same ring structure encircles a molecule of magnesium, giving leaves their greenness.[19]

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[18] I am grateful to astrophysicist Leon Golub and Anne Davenport for these examples. On the discussion of symbiogenesis in the natural life sciences, see note 3 above. See also the work of Lubna Dada, an atmospheric scientist who studies how trees and plants contribute to cloud formation, cooling "cloud seeds" when they are stressed by heat.

[19] See Kearney, *Becoming Forest*, 35–36, 131–32, 201, where the author recommends "mindfulness breathing" as a basic practice for reconnecting with our natural environment in a spirit of mutual nurturing and "deep resilience for uncertain times." In similar vein, see Leah Schade on the symbiotic dialectics of inhalation-exhalation:

> As you breathe in, you are taking in oxygen, which is released by trees and all green-growing things. As you breathe out, you exhale carbon dioxide, which in turn is being taken up by trees.... You are as solid as the earth and made from the same atoms of carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, and nitrogen that make up the earth.... All the elements that make up your body came from stars that exploded millions of years ago...connecting us to the air and to plants, to the earth, to waters and the sea, to the animals, and to the stars.... We exist within an interconnected web of relationships—brother-sister beings with the rest of life.

This act of bio-chemical mirroring constitutes a recursive dance of identity (ring structure) and difference (colour), epitomizing a primal ecological collaboration between human and non-human life. "The world comes to breathe within me," as Gaston Bachelard writes. "Everything breathes in the world."[20]

The era of the Anthropocene has witnessed a massive deterioration of our terrestrial ecosystem. The facts are stark and incontrovertible. Almost half of the earth's surface has been impacted by human activity. The concentration of carbon in the earth's atmosphere has been increased by 30% since the onset of the industrial revolution, while recent history has seen the disappearance of over a quarter of the globe's bird species, with two thirds of the world's fish species now endangered or over-exploited.[21] But we must be wary of apocalyptic thinking. Too much environmental talk today is stuck in the horror-mode of shame, guilt, and despair.[22] Alarmism is no substitute for action. Let us return then to things of the earth. We often speak of nature as something outside of ourselves, but we are in fact deeply embedded in it from first to last. Humans are a natural, incarnate species amongst others. For too long we have viewed nature as something there *for us*—a thing to be used, calculated, and consumed. We have treated it as a repository of experimental objects or as an amusement park for fantasies—a rustic wilderness which we romanticized or feared. It would be wiser, however, while there

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Schade, "Kinship with Creation," in *Rooted and Rising: Voices of Courage in a Time of Climate Crisis*, (ed.) L. D. Schade and M. Bullitt-Jonas (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 76–77. See also Jean-Louis Chrétien who, like the French mystic Claudel before him, takes the paradigm of "cosmic respiration" as central for all flourishing interpersonal relations, connecting self and other. By breathing in and out, he writes, "I am possible only through another, from another, and by taking that other into myself. The model of autarchic self-reliance and of self-growth whereby I would aim at thriving by myself is really a model of asphyxia and death." Chrétien, *Spacious Joy*, (tr.) A. Davenport (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 170.

[20] Such a phenomenology of symbiotic respiration points beyond the individualism of the Anthropocene. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, (tr.) D. Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 179. Here, Bachelard writes of the ecological "milieu" between human and arboreal nature: "It breathes me...the world comes to breathe within me; I participate in the good breathing of the world."

[21] See the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services (2019), cited in Michael Cronin, *Irish and Ecology* (Dublin: FÁS, 2019), 36.

[22] Treanor, "Thinking like a Jaguar."

is still time, to see the earth as a living whole which hosts the human within it.[23]

Our ecological emergency reminds us that nature can no longer be considered something external to us. Instead of priding ourselves as a species apart, dominating other species on this planet, we should humbly acknowledge that we are one species amongst others living in a web of mutual interdependency. This realization of our symbiotic relation to nature calls in turn for a rapprochement between the human and natural sciences which have functioned as rivals for centuries, the former devoted to matters of psyche, spirit, and the arts while the latter gravitated toward a "naturalist" description of empirical experience as a composite of measurable and computable data. The climate crisis reminds us that human nature and non-human nature can no longer be dualistically segregated in this manner, even for the purposes of knowledge. And this calls for a new epistemological hospitality between the sundered human and natural sciences and, by extension, a radically new politics of sovereignty: "a power-sharing where we look at non-human agents (water/temperature/soil) as constituent parts of a common world...a sort of post-human, post-nationalist sovereignty that sees territorial integrity not based on separation and exclusion but on interdependency and inclusion."[24]

The global market system has turned nature into a conduit of consumer goods, transforming plants and animals into commodities for profit and exchange. There is no denying that modernity has brought extraordinary technological advances. It has given us many goods; but they are not all good. We need to discern between the deployment of technology that threatens our natural environment

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[23] Treanor, "Preserving the Wilderness Idea." See also Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Pelican, 2018), discussed in Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*, 47, 51–56. Morton believes that humans have been traumatized by being sundered from non-human beings and calls for new modes of reconnection to places and practices of nature. Cronin sees such practices of reconnection as deeply tied to a recovery of lost or threatened linguistic and ecological cultures, which need to be retrieved if we are to respond to our anthropogenic climate crisis and so attempt to give a future to our past (*ibid.*, 51–56). Such insights are in keeping with a whole generation of contemporary nature writers ranging from John Moriarty (*Nostos*), Mary Oliver (*A Thousand Mornings*), and Wendell Berry (*The Gift of Good Land*) to Manchán Magan (*Thirty Three Words for a Field*), David Wood (*Reoccupy the Earth*), and Robert MacFarlane (*Landmarks*), all of whom explore the intimate symbiotic relationship between landscape (nature as place) and language (poetics).

[24] Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*, 69. See also my analysis of postmodern sovereignty in Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1997).

and technology that collaborates with the call of the earth in a new wager of ecological hospitality.[25] The choice is stark and challenging, but not impossible. And in choosing we may act as "edge dwellers," navigating between the twin demands of ecology and economy, technology and wilding, nature and culture.[26] Above all, we must

[25] See the Guestbook Project [https://guestbookproject.org] and my discussion of this theme in previous publications, such as R. Kearney and K. Semonovitch, eds., *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); R. Kearney and J. Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (London: Continuum, 2009); and Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022).

[26] See Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021). Edge walkers, according to Loorz, are those called to the thresholds—the edges between the polarized spaces which most people inhabit during the reign of the Anthropocene. The edges between biosystems are called *ecotones*, marking thresholds which contain the most biodiversity and therefore are the most resilient. Loorz calls for a time "when the edges we inhabit will start to redefine the center. And we will need to lean on and learn from one another as we, together, engage in the work of that redefining. Each of us is characterized by our own unique gifts, communities of influence, and a particular bio-region. But we cannot behave as silos. The more diverse our relationships are, the more resiliently we can hold our own individual edges" (*ibid.*, 15). Loorz applies this edge walking to interspiritual symbiosis as a comparative theology of the earth. Citing a gathering of spiritual leaders from different traditions, she notes that what they shared most in common was *life on this planet.* She observes a deep link between interfaith compassion and eco-hospitality: "We talked about how our faith traditions could connect us with the actual soil and water and creatures of Earth. And how that connection could be a spiritual foundation for the environmental movement. What I remember most was a golden thread of mystical connection with divine presence that all of us expressed in our relationships with the natural world. Even in our diversity, we all felt that we had more in common with one another—edge walkers from other traditions—than we did with people more firmly planted in the center of our own faiths" (*ibid.*, 14). She concludes with a plea for a new generation of edge walkers who would refuse to follow the dualist furrows of the Anthropocene, acknowledging instead that "at that edge, spirituality and nature are in unbroken relationship" (*ibid.*, 16). On this idea of edge walking between spirituality and nature, see also Benjamin Webb, "In Search of Our Fugitive Faith: Terry Tempest Williams," in *Fugitive Faith: Conversations on Spiritual, Environmental, and Community Renewal* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998). On the panentheist co-belonging of earth and divinity, see the discussion by Franciscan sister and scientist Ilia Delio on nature as a symbiotic holarchy rather than a top-down hierarchy: Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2013), 128–129, 130, 131. See finally the work of Maxine Greene and Jennifer Ayres on sacred geopoetics and ecotheology in Greene and Ayres, *Inhabitance:Ecological Religious Education* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019).

recover our vocation as hosts and guests of the earth—sensitive and sensible partners in the breathing in and out of Being. And this is where we—*homo sapiens*—must return to the humour and humility of being thankful to our primary host of hosts, the earth itself: the *humus* of our humanity which connects us to all living creatures, human and non-human alike. The very heart of nature herself. Merleau-Ponty captures this fundamental hospitality of ecological existence when he writes,

> There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen.... There is no break at all in this circuit; it is impossible to say that nature ends here and that man or expression starts here. It is, therefore, mute Being which itself comes to show forth its own meaning.[27]

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[27] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," (tr.) C. Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception*, (ed.) J. M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 167, 188. Merleau-Ponty cites the painter Paul Klee, who attested to the reversible relationship between the seer and the seen: "In a forest, I have felt many times over that it was not I who looked at the forest. Some days I felt that the trees were looking at me, were speaking to me.... I was there, listening," to which Merleau-Ponty adds, "[I]t becomes impossible to distinguish between what paints and what is painted" (*ibid.*, 167). Merleau-Ponty bases his phenomenology of reversible double sensation on the experience of each embodied subject immersed in the "flesh of the world." We are bodies inhabiting the greater body of the earth in a two-way relation. We are in nature and nature is in us. Or as Paul Valéry wrote, language is above all else "the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests" (as noted in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, [ed.] C. Lefort, [tr.] A. Lingis [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968], 155). The earthly biosphere we humans inhabit is, deep down, an interworld (*entre deux*) of mutual intertwining and entanglement. A "chiasm" wherein what I touch is at the same time what touches me, just as what I see is what sees me. Gaston Bachelard also writes of this double tactile vision: "[B]etween [the dreamer] and the world, there is an exchange of looks, as in the double look [between lovers]...everything I look at looks at me" (Bachelard, *Poetics of Reverie*, 185). I have endeavoured to develop this phenomenology of double sensation in a number of recent works including Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 45–52; R. Kearney and B. Treanor, eds., *Carnal Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), Chapter 2; and Kearney, "Anacarnation: Recovering Embodied Life" in Treanor and Taylor, *Anacarnation*.