

Hosting Earth: Radical Ecological Hospitality

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If we surrendered to earth's intelligence we could rise up rooted, like trees . . .
Earth, what, if not transformation, is your insistent commission?
—Reiner Maria Rilke

We are all born of the earth and return to it in the end. As the earliest myths remind us, humans were formed from mud—*humus*—and it is with humble humanity that we recall our terrestrial origins. Our first calling as humans was to remain faithful to the earth which bore us, and the call will not go silent for as long as we dwell on this planet.

Today the earth cries out. Our ecological crisis has become an emergency. We have been aware of a growing climate crisis on our planet for almost half a century. Scientists and climatologists have issued repeated warnings for decades now. But we are still not making the critical changes necessary to save existing life on this planet. The COP28 was another chilling reminder that we are moving perilously toward the 4-degree mark. And even if we manage to reduce carbon emission to net 0 by 2050, we are still prone to a climatological legacy of perilous proportions. Wildfires, floods, melting glaciers, heatwaves and shore erasures are bound to increase. We are faced with an alarming biodiversity collapse with the global wildlife population shrinking by over 60 percent in the last fifty years. We have polluted the earth upsetting the chemical composition of our planet's atmosphere and the pH of our oceans. Microplastics

contaminate our soil and sea, falling in rain from the sky and circulating throughout the body's blood, even in placentas and breast milk. There is no place immune to the threat of human appropriation.¹ The scientific data is irrefutable; and there is hardly a school child today unable to explain Global Warming or the Greenhouse Effect. A recent UNESCO questionnaire amongst young people showed that our climate emergency is now recognized world-wide as our most pressing ethical concern, along with poverty and migration which are inextricably linked. We suffer from a Nature Dissociation Disorder.² And yet, with few exceptions, the political will to take urgent action seems unconscionably absent. So what is to be done?

We might begin with a simple change of mind. What if we were to perform a paradigm shift in our way of viewing the earth, seeing it as a host that nurtures us rather than an object to be exploited? What if we listened to the cry of the earth, adopting a disposition of deep ecological hospitality toward all living beings? Such a shift would mean replacing the Anthropocene of relentless human domination, which has brought us to brink of disaster, with a Symbiocene of deep interdependency between humans and nature. The *Anthropos*—defined by Plato as the being who looks up and away from nature—must rediscover its primal belonging as *symbiosis*: living together with different species in mutual dependency.³

¹ For these references and more detailed information about our climate emergency see the report of COP28 (28th United Nations Climate Change Conference 2023) as well as the informative contributions by Brian Treanor, Sean McGrath and David Storey to our edited volume, *Hosting Earth*, Routledge, London and New York, 2024, ed Richard Kearney, Peter Klapes and Urwa Hameed. See also our opening conversation with Mary Robinson in the *Hosting Earth* volume, discussing her influential work *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience and the fight for a Sustainable Future*, Bloomsbury, 2018.

² See Richard Louv's ecological analysis of our "nature deficit disorder" in the Anthropocene. This deficit is symptomatic of a pathological dissociation which expresses itself as a deep "species loneliness" and, by reaction, as a "touch hunger" to return to our fundamental being-with-nature, in accordance with what Louv calls the "reciprocity principle" of mutual interspecies belonging (*The Wild Calling: How Connecting with Animals can Save our lives and save Theirs*, Algonquin, Chapel Hill, NC, 2019). See our discussion of this theme in *Touch: Recovering our most Vital Sense*, Columbia UP, 2021, 109-111. Where the Anthropocene is typified by the domination of an optocentric-logocentric metaphysics of dualism, dating back to Plato, the symbiocene takes its tune from the phenomenological insight into the reciprocal character of touch, first recognized by Aristotle in the *De Anima* and revisited by Husserl (*Ideas 2*) and Merleau-Ponty (*Visible and the Invisible*) in their classic analysis of the hand touching the hand. Whereas one can see without being seen (unilateral perception), one cannot touch without being touched – that is, recursively tangible and tactile. Hence the reciprocity principle of the symbiocene which we explore and endorse in *Touch*, 33-60.

³ The Greek term symbiosis translates into Latin as convivium, "living together," one meaning of which is "feast." As Catherine Keller remarks: "The primal eucharist of life seems to find its genesis less in competition than in collaboration" (*The Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* Columbia UP, 2015 157). Drawing on the research of biologist Lynne Margulis and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, amongst others, Keller discusses the function of a wide range of "scientific symbioses" demonstrating the "elemental relationalism of microorganisms."

But what might this entail? First, there is the *moral* task of making the climate crisis count in our lives with others in our immediate environment (e.g. recycle, reuse and refuse pollutant energies). Second, we have the *political* task of expressing righteous indignation towards those in positions of power who are not doing what they should be doing—a move requiring public awareness and protest. Third, there is the *practical* step of identifying and supporting NGOs and other organizations that are creating grass roots green teams working for change—a reminder that we are all in this together. When it comes to sharing our endangered planet we are irrevocably interconnected, whether we like it or not. And this calls for a fourth step—what we might call the *pedagogical* commitment to renewed conversation about what needs to be done. An act of “conscientization” regarding the mutual interdependency between humans and nature. This fourth step marks a radical transition to a Symbiocene of interpersonal interspecies hospitality, based on practices of environmental justice and reciprocity. A move that requires that we cease being victims of apocalypse and become “prisoners of hope.”

In the beginning was symbiosis; and the earth can still be our teacher if we acknowledge it as host and ourselves as guests. Trees are a perennial example 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 who discovered that forests have “mother trees” or large interconnecting hubs whose underground mycorrhizal relationships contribute to forest resiliency, adaptability, and survival.⁴ This has major implications

Margulis exposed 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 to a relation of feeding: “but 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.” Symbiogenesis is a primordial activity of collaboration in life, from the microscale of tiny organisms to the macroscale of the universe. Acknowledging this primal phenomenon of symbiosis may encourage us to replace the anthropocentric dualism of separate substances (e.g. *res cogitans* and *res extensa*) with a dynamic process 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 its differently” (Keller, 175 f P 176-177). Symbiogenesis may thus be said to convene the opposites of identity and difference, unity and multiplicity—the physical universe mirroring the metaphysical interplay of the one and the many.

⁴ See Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Penguin Random House, 2021), and the very influential novel by Richard Power, *The Understory*, 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 “How the Trees see us,” Guestbook Project film 2021 on

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, modern humanity’s determination to exploit nature, reducing living things to commodities of consumption and exchange. Our voluntarist anthropocentrism was epitomized by Descartes’ famous boast that “man is master and possessor of nature”; and it finds symptomatic expression in the rapacious food and fossil industries of our modern market economies.

In contrast to this top-down hegemonic model, consider closely the circular mutuality of the symbiotic model. 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 example, 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 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.⁵

The tree is a perennial motif of the *axis mundi*—a sheltering host and heart of nature. Trees, in multiple wisdom traditions, embody a medial sacred space between land and sky, considered a middle world connecting the earth beneath our feet and the air above our heads. The Buddha, for example achieved enlightenment by breathing in harmony with a Bodhi tree. Christ enacted the dying-and-rising cycle of life by offering himself to the world on a tree grown from the root of Jesse.⁶ Indeed, one of

“Hosting Earth” Guestbookproject.org. 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” (*The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern UP, 1964, 167. See also note 20 below).

⁵ See the review essay by Elizabeth Kolbert of Allison Pouliot’s “*Meetings with Remarkable Mushrooms: Forays with Fungi across Hemispheres*, U Chicago Press, 2023” in *The New York Review*, vol LXX, no 14, sept 21, 2023, 42-43. See also the important research of Michael Pollan on what might be called psychedelic symbiosis, *How to Change Your Mind* (2018).

⁶ 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*, Eastern Studio Press,

the seminal themes of all world religions is the “Great mother and her symbol, the Tree,” epitomized by the indigenous belief in a “bush soul” that becomes incarnate in living plants, which in turn host and protect humans as their guests.⁷ This panpsychist belief is still held by many indigenous people today, as the native American elder, Lisa Wisapeth reminds us. When one thinks of the Earth like a mother, she writes, 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*.”⁸ But few of us live in that symbiotic relationship today, as dark clouds crowd our skies. We have become “disconnected” from our elementary and elemental relation to the earth, no longer acknowledging her as our Mother. Lisa’s fellow elder, Wolf Wisapeth, 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. 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.⁹

2023) and Mircea Eliade’s treatment of the tree as a mythological and ritual axis mundi in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Sheed and Ward, 1958.

⁷ Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, 6-7 and 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”(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*, Pantheon Books, 1996 and *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*, Vintage, 2011.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Lisa and Wolf Wisapeth in conversation with Michael Kearney, “Listening to the Earth” in *Hosting Earth*. See also Randy Woodley on the sustained ecological hope of indigenous First Nation 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.

Another powerful exponent of ecological hospitality is the indigenous scientist, Robin Kimmerer, who is a nature writer of the Potawatomi Nation and professor of Environmental Biology at SUNY. In her influential book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), she celebrates the indigenous agricultural practice of the Three Sisters: namely, three common 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.” Indeed the Potawatomi language construes most of the world as a composite interaction between animate beings, using verbs rather than nouns to describe them. 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 living beings deserving reverence and respect.¹⁰ Which is not to deny that nature can be “naturing” in multiple ways. While nourishing and sustaining us, it also harbors shadows and Sunderings, decomposition as well as growth, death drives as well as life drives, all convening in a complex interplay of forces.¹¹

The symbiotic paradigm espoused by such indigenous thinking does not signal 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. And 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

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, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 57–58.

¹⁰ Robin Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Milkweed editions, 2013, 128-140.

¹¹ 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 harboring 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 our own idealized image or fantasy. Nature remains, deep down, an unknowable enigma, at best a numinous mystery. See Brian Treanor on the deep perplexity of many nature writers—e.g. Thoreau, Nan Shepherd, Annie Dillard—before these complex paradoxes of natural life (Treanor, “Preserving the Wilderness Idea,” forthcoming in the *Hedgehog Review* 2024 and “Thinking Like a Jaguar: Carnal Hermeneutics, Touch and the Limits of Language” in *Anacarnation*, ed Brian Treanor and James Taylor (Routledge, 2023, 1-11).

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 (distance from star, mass of planet, presence of atmosphere) and internal conditions (preservation of habitats suitable for life). Similarly our solar system itself involves actions of dynamic interaction and equilibrium which correspond to a form of what we might call cosmic symbiosis. And what is true of astrophysics is equally true of the new life sciences which attest to the existence of multiple ecosystems of reciprocal interdependency and interaction, known as symbiogenesis.¹²

It is curious how many contemporary scientists of matter have sought out conversations with some of the world's great spiritual leaders—David Bohm's exchanges with Krishnamurti, the Dalai Lama's dialogues with Harvard neurologists, Pope Francis' engagement with environmental scientists in *Laudato Si*. In addition to the four steps of ecological hospitality—practical, moral, political and pedagogical—we might consider adding a fifth "spiritual" one. Indeed, it is probably true to say that almost every wisdom tradition harbors a special place for theophanies of the earth.¹³

¹² I am grateful to astrophysicist Leon Golub and philosopher of Science Anne Davenport for these examples. On the discussion of symbiogenesis in the natural life sciences see note on Catherine Keller above.

¹³ A view represented, for example, in our *Hosting Earth* edited volume (Routledge, 2024) by Buddhist thinkers like Jason Wirth and Michael Kearney (inspired by the teachings of Joanna Macy and Thich Nhat Hahn), by the conversations on "Asian" spiritualities of nature moderated by David Storey, as well as by the essays of Christian theologians like Catherine Keller, Rowan Williams, and Joseph O'Leary, who commends a symbiotic poetics of nature articulated by Hölderlin and Rilke. Another philosophy informing this volume is Celtic pantheism which sees divinity as a river running through all living things (Eriugena), a flourishing force of natural life (Pelagius). Celtic theologies of nature chime with other pantheist spiritualities ranging from Saint Francis's "Canticle of Creation," to the nature mysticism of Bruno of Nola and Hildegard of Bingen. For more on the Celtic pantheism of thinkers like Eriugena, Scotus and Pelagius, see our essay, "My Way to Theopoetics through Eriugena" in *Literature and Theology*, no 33, 2019. Pelagius, for example, celebrated God's presence in nature thus: "Look at the animals roaming the forest/Look at the birds flying across the sky/Look at the insects crawling in the grass/Look at the fish in the rivers and sea/Look at the great trees of the forest/Look at your crops and plant/God dwells in them all." And Pelagius adds: "There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent . . . When God pronounced that his creation was good, it was not only that his hand had fashioned every creature; it was that his breath had brought every creature to life . . . The presence of God's spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God's eyes, nothing on earth is ugly" (cited, Richard Rohr CAC, 2018). On the formative influence of Eriugena's Celtic philosophy on subsequent Irish thought, see our "Dialogue with Borges" on the "Irish Mind" in *The Crane Bag*, Joyce Issue, Vol 3, 1981). Duns Scotus was a Celtic Franciscan who recognized the "mystery of incarnation" in the particular thisness (*haecceitas*) of all created things. The Franciscan vision sees that "the visible world is an active doorway to the invisible world . . . Matter is, and has always been, the hiding place for Spirit, forever offering itself to

One doesn't have to look as far as astrophysics or comparative theology, however, for fundamental paradigms of symbiotic existence. It is to be found in the act of breathing itself. Take the symbiotic event of inhaling the oxygen produced by leaves as they receive the carbon dioxide exhaled from our lungs. Every rising and falling breath participates in an exchange between our body and the plant, mutually releasing and receiving chemical properties crucial for our respective flourishing. Each inhalation and exhalation embodies an effortless reciprocal flow, all by itself—involuntary, ubiquitous, the most basic act of life from birth to death. Human hemoglobin and chlorophyll molecules in leaves are almost identical, except that in hemoglobin the carbon rings encircle a molecule of iron, giving blood its red color, while in chlorophyll the very same ring structure encircles a molecule of manganese giving leaves their greenness.¹⁴ This act of mutual bio-chemical mirroring constitutes a recursive dance of identity (ring structure) and difference (color), epitomizing the primal ecological paradigm of two-way collaboration between human and non-human life.

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 intervention. 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 considered

be discovered anew. Francis and his companion St. Clare carried this mystery to its full conclusions... (knowing) that the beyond was not really beyond, but in the depths of here" (Richard Rohr, Centre for Contemplation and Action, Oct 3, 2023). This Scotist-Franciscan view of nature found powerful expression in the poetics of Gerald Manley Hopkins who spoke of a sacramental inscape and instress in all living things (see his classic nature poems, "Pied Beauty" and "When Kingfishers catch Fire"). See also the Franciscan panenthesim informing Pope Francis' encyclical on nature and climate, *Laudato Si*, outlined in Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (London: Chapman, 1986). Other contributors to *Hosting Earth* echo this Scotist vision in their exploration of the animist, panpsychic wisdoms of indigenous spiritualities and the ecological mindfulness of Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hahn and Joanna Macy. See the contributions by Chandler Rogers, Christopher Yates, Brian Treanor, Sean McGrath, and Michael Kearney, as well as by environmental artists Jane Marsching and Edward Casey.

¹⁴ See Michael Kearney, *Becoming Forest*, 35-36, 131-132 and 201, where the author recommends "mindfulness breathing" as a basic practice for reconnecting with our natural environment in a spirit of mutual enlivening, nurturing "deep resilience for uncertain times." 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." (J.-L. Chrétien, *Spacious Joy*, trans. Anne Davenport, Rowman and Littlefield, 2019, 170).

endangered or over-exploited.¹⁵ But we must be wary of apocalyptic thinking. Too much of our environmental talk is stuck in the horror-mode of “disgust, guilt and shame.”¹⁶ Alarmism is no substitute for urgent thought and action.

Let us return 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 other incarnate species. For too long we have viewed nature as something there *for us*—a thing to be used, commodified and consumed. We have treated it as a repository of experimental objects or as an amusement park for our fantasies—a rustic wilderness which we romanticized or feared. But would we not be wiser, while there is still time, to regard nature as a living being which hosts the human within it?¹⁷ As the wisdom traditions teach, we are all children of the great Mother who created us.

The global market system has turned nature into a conduit of consumer goods, transforming plants and animals into food 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 discriminate between the deployment of science and technology to threaten our natural environment or to collaborate with the call of the earth in a symbiotic renewal of life, a new wager of ecological hospitality.¹⁸ The choice is stark and challenging, but not impossible. And

¹⁵ See the “Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Services,” 2019, cited Michael Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*, Foras Na Gaeilge, 2019, 36.

¹⁶ See Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological*, discussed by Michael 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 attempt to give a future to our past (51-56). Such deep 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).

¹⁷ See Guestbookproject.org and our discussion of this theme in previous publications such as *Phenomenology of the Stranger*, edited Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch, Fordham UP, 2011, *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*, edited Richard Kearney and James Taylor, Continuum, 2009 and *Radical Hospitality*, edited Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, Fordham UP, 2022

¹⁸ What the ecological emergency brings home to us is 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 nature as a composite of measurable and computable data. The

in choosing we do well to live as “edge dwellers,” navigating between the twin demands of ecology and economy, technology and wilding, culture and nature, the human and non-human (animal, vegetal, mineral and divine).¹⁹ Above all, we must 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 humor and humility of being thankful to the earth: the *humus* of our humanity which connects us to all living creatures, human and non-human alike. The very heart of nature herself.

There really is inspiration and expiration of being, action and passion so slightly discernible that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what

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” (Michael Cronin, *Irish and Ecology*, 69. And see our essays on postmodern sovereignty in *Post Nationalist Ireland* (Routledge, London and New York, 1998).

¹⁹ Edge walkers, according to Victoria 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” (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.” 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” (Victoria Loorz, *Church of the Wild: How Nature Invites Us into the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 14-16. 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, NY: 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 (*The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013, 128–129, 130, 131).

sees and what is seen . . . There is no break at all in this circuit and we are unable to say that nature ends here and human expression starts there. It is mute Being which itself comes to show forth its meaning.²⁰

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern UP, 1964, 167. Merleau-Ponty cites the painter 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 . . . It becomes impossible to distinguish between what paints and what is painted” (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’s wrote, language is above all else “the very voice of the trees, the waves and the forest.” 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. I have endeavored to develop this phenomenology of double sensation in a number of recent works including *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital sense*, Columbia UP, 2021, 45-52, *Carnal Hermeneutics* (ed with Brian Treanor), Fordham UP, 2015, ch. 2, and “Anacarnation: Recovering Embodied Life” in *Anacarnation: Returning to the Body with Richard Kearney*, ed Brian Treanor and James Taylor, Routledge, 2022.