Cultivating ecosophy: a dialog with the contemporary vision fast company

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This paper considers the question, how can ecosophical subjectivities be nourished and provided space to grow? Using the philosophies of Felix Guattari and Val Plumwood, I suggest that ecosophical subjectivity be thought of as an identity and sense of self that both understands and experiences being human as arising from multiple nonhuman components of subjectivity and many inter-species relationships. As one answer to the paper’s central question, I describe and interpret the practice of the contemporary vision fast ceremony. It is a ten-day offering centered on four days of fasting alone in the high desert. Drawing on ethnographic research, I argue that the practice can foster the lived experience of a widely diffused sense of human subjectivity, which arises from a field including many nonhuman others. I offer a descriptive interpretation of the practice by weaving together the ethnographic narrative with the theoretical contributions of Guattari and Plumwood. I conclude by considering critiques that might dismiss the practice as a nostalgic yearning for a romantic nature and I argue that the practice actually represents a complex integration of ancient forms and contemporary contexts.

Preamble

This story begins in the Inyo mountains, an ancient range that rises up out of California’s Owens valley, marking the beginning of the seemingly endless undulations of basins and mountain ranges that extend all the way to the Colorado Plateau and Utah’s Wasatch Range, hundreds of miles to the east. The basins are covered in sage. As the ranges rise up, the sage gives way to pinyon-juniper forest, then white pine and bristlecones at the highest elevations. Basin, range, repeat.

Writer Mary Austin called this place the land of lost borders, a name she learned from Paiute friends. She wrote, it is a place ‘where the boundary of soul and sense is as faint as a trail in a sand-storm … where the names mean something’ (Austin 1987, 3). For the Paiute who lived prior to white colonization, lost borders referred to how territorial boundaries between groups grew fuzzy in the desert, determined more by access to ephemeral water sources than hard territorial demarcations. Austin added another layer of psychic significance to the name as she chronicled the lives of white miners and settlers along with Paiute people adapting to life under colonization.

I am here to visit the School of Lost Borders (SOLB), a place I have come to understand as a practical laboratory of subjectivity. For 40 years, guides from the school have been facilitating solo
wilderness experiences they call vision fast ceremonies in the Inyo mountains and the nearby Death Valley. I will refer to it as the contemporary vision fast ceremony to distinguish it from related practices, especially the Native American tradition of the Vision Quest, which is an important inspiration for the school’s work. Participants in their programmes travel from across the United States and Europe to take part in SOLB programmes. When the group gathers, the first few days are spent establishing a context and foundation for the approaching fast. Guides offer what they call the ‘bare bones’, a minimal structure for the fast so that participants can engage it through their own lens. One element is a model that maps human psychological development as a spiral roughly mirrored by the passing of the four boreal seasons and the four cardinal directions. Mapping human development onto the land provides a frame for participants to guide their experience in relationship to place. Guides teach some basic elements of what they call self-designed ceremony, which are rituals, tasks, or tools that participants might use to shape their own experience, but they generally avoid prescribing how the fast should unfold in order to keep it approachable to people from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds. Participants then trudge into the desert, and fast alone for four days and nights. They are without human company unless an emergency arises. In the process, they face traumas and life transitions, play with the boundaries of subjectivity, and learn to experience the land and its more-than-human communities as animate – full of ensouled nonhuman others to whom we owe ethical obligations and who might have something to say. Afterwards, they return to tell their stories and listen to the guides offer an interpretive reflection of each story, a process I will detail below. I have come to the school following a hunch that their work might speak to those of us in the academy struggling to not only describe but experience subjectivity as immanent to an animate earth (Country et al. 2015; Country et al. 2016; Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg 2015; van Dooren and Rose 2016; Rose 2013; Whatmore 2002). I hope to encourage a conversation between practitioners and scholars, connecting the methodologies of experiential immersion and critical reflection.

At the moment, I am seated in the sparse shade of pinyon pine and juniper trees, circled up with 15 or so others. The heat of the afternoon sun fills the air with the scent of pinyon sap. The two note whistle of mountain chickadees blend with the movement of air through the trees, the occasional rumble of a motorcycle travelling down the nearby highway, and the sounds of human conversation. I am absorbed in this place and the story unfolding before me in the circle.

Anna, a participant in this vision fast ceremony, sits rapt with attention, tears streaming down her face as Betsy, one of the guides, touches her shoulder with a piece of Bristlecone pine. The bristlecones grow just up the hill from us. Some are as old as 4000 or 5000 years and they have witnessed the passing of the seasons since before the Greeks started arguing about subjectivity. Anna has just finished telling the story of her fast to our group and she is listening as Betsy ‘mirrors’ it back to her. Mirroring is a process of interpretive listening through which individual fasters’ stories become a collective production of the more-than-human social world, upon which I elaborate below. Anna had experienced her fast as somewhat lonely, lethargic, and ‘boring’. It lacked the ‘magical charge’ that she often associated with ceremonies like these. However, it was punctuated by one ‘magical’ sunrise that she came to understand as a way to claim that she had moved beyond the grief of miscarriage and the death of her mother. Betsy says, ‘the heart of ordinary magic beats inside of her. The only thing I know for certain is that the sun will rise again. If that’s not magic, what is? If it can’t be ordinary, it can’t be magic’.

**Introduction**

As a contribution to this special issue on ecosophical geographies (Shaw and Aiken, forthcoming), this paper considers the practice of the contemporary vision fast ceremony at the School of Lost Borders (SOLB), explored here through Anna’s story, as an ecosophical practice. Ecosophy is a term I borrow from Felix Guattari (2000), who used it to name the philosophical and activist work needed to confront the material, social, and psychic dimensions of ecological crisis. I will
delve into a more thorough definition shortly. I offer this narrative and its interpretation as one articulation of the practice of ecosophy, not as a definitive statement of how ecosophy must be practiced. It is my assertion that experiential practices that can encourage the felt experience of the more-than-human world as an animate and enchanted place are an important component of efforts to break free of dominant subjectivities that tend to objectify others, and these experiential practices have the potential to cultivate creative ways of becoming alive to intersubjective relationships that traverse the boundaries of species and materiality. Such practices help to develop the ethical commitment and political will to confront the complex entanglements that produce socio-ecological crises such as climate change, species loss, and environmental degradation (Kahn 1999; Keller 2010; Macy 1995).

I have structured the paper in the following way. I first offer brief note on methodology. Next, I introduce the two theoretical influences that I will draw upon in my interpretation, Felix Guattari’s ecosophy and Val Plumwood’s work, which she ultimately termed philosophical animism. I then return to Anna’s story, first introduced in the preamble, and offer a detailed account of her experience of the contemporary vision fast ceremony. I interpret Anna’s experience through Guattari and Plumwood in order to offer a sense of her subjectivity as arising from immanent relationship with the more-than-human world and a sense of the others with whom she interacts as animate, soulful beings. I hope this leads to an appreciation of both her experience and the practice of the fast as an experiential instantiation of ecosophy. Finally, I consider objections that might construe the practice as a nostalgic yearning for an authentic self rooted in a romantic nature, and how the interpretation offered here presents a more rich account of the practice that puts it in dialog with understandings of self and nature that do not rely on essential definitions of either.

**A note on methodology**

This paper draws upon ongoing fieldwork in SOLB programmes, which I began in 2014. I focus on Anna’s story in this paper, but my interpretive efforts are also rooted in my observation of dozens of others’ experiences, my own time travelling and fasting in wild places, with mirroring others’ stories, and having my own stories reflected by fellow participants and guides. Given that important elements of the contemporary vision fast ceremony are undertaken in solitude, it is not possible to fully ‘be there’ in the traditional sense of participant–observation. My ongoing immersion in the school’s practices – participation in vision fast ceremonies, mirroring workshops, and working as an assistant guide – affords me the chance to personally take up the questions of subjectivity that the practice raises and to listen to participant stories from a more empathic position (see Carlin, 2017). I also draw upon my professional experience as a wilderness-based psychotherapist. Our experiences, of course, are singular, though the shared process of fasting and telling stories with each other develops our capacity for mutual support and understanding. I strive for an iterative process of experience and critical reflection that builds both a practice and a descriptive scholarship of more-than-human subjectivity rooted in an animate landscape.

**Animating theories**

I am concerned with the question, how can ecosophical subjectivities be nourished and provided space to grow? By ecosophical subjectivities, I mean identities and senses of self that both understand and experience being human as arising from nonhuman components and inter-species relationships. I use Felix Guattari’s development of ecosophy and Val Plumwood’s theorizing on the subjectivity of the more-than-human world in order to examine how Anna develops an ecosophical subjectivity in the course of her fast.

Ecosophy is the name that both Guattari and Arne Naess gave to their philosophical projects (Guattari 2000; Naess 1992; Naess 2008). Guattari, whose version I use as my point of departure,
employs the term ecosophy to refer to the conceptual work and activism that must be employed in order to confront socio-ecological crisis across what he identified as the three ecologies – the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity (2000, 28). Guattari’s ecosophy is an argument that solutions to socio-ecological crisis – climate change, species extinction, human displacement, inequities in consumption – will be found not only by confronting the technical challenges posed by the crises, but that the social and existential dimensions of the crisis must be faced as well. How one imagines what it is to be human, how the production of identity is understood, and whether the more-than-human world can be understood as more than a collection of resources are equally important challenges (Abram 1997). Writing in the late 1980s, when understanding of global climate change was just coming into focus, Guattari insisted on the urgency of facing the psychic and social damage, as well as the material environmental destruction, wrought by capitalist social and economic systems, what he called Integrated World Capitalism (IWC). He writes that it makes no sense to ‘make a distinction between action on the psyche, the socius and the environment’ (Guattari 2000, 28), as if environmental devastation could be so neatly separated from the rest of life. Instead, he weaves together a critique of the standardizations of culture enabled by mass media, an analysis of how that standardization limits how one can understand themselves and their world, and the consequent material aspects of environmental damage. Ecosophy, for Guattari, is the integrative challenge of learning and implementing new ways of being with the ecologies of self, community, and the world.

Guattari’s ecosophy delves into the scalar paradoxes of global socio-ecological crisis, forging intimate links between the world of the psyche and global systems. He writes that socio-ecological crisis calls into question ‘the ways of living on this planet … [and] the only true response to the ecological crisis is on a global scale’ (2000, 28). However, he also argues that the revolution that he hopes for cannot be achieved by working only on the scale of institutions, but must also be struggled for in the ‘molecular domains of sensibility, intelligence, and desire’ (2000, 28). At the level of subjectivity, how one experiences and understands what it is to be a human self, Guattari hoped to foster ‘dissensus’ or ‘soft subversions’ that challenge the deadening objectifications and ‘infantilizing consensus’ of IWC (2000, 33). These soft subversions can unfold at the level of subjectivity through inquiry both into how it is that one comes to have an experience of self in the world and through therapeutic experiences that help to produce different subjectivities. I am not arguing that these soft subversions should be privileged above institutional changes. What I am arguing is that they deserve careful attention. Furthermore, I want to make the point that ‘micro’ practices like this fast can play an important role in shifting dominant psychic and social ecologies, creating more possibility for necessary institutional changes to unfold.

When I describe the SOLB, whose guides facilitated Anna’s fast, as a practical laboratory of subjectivity, I am approaching subjectivity as something that can be experimented with and moulded. The idea of the human subject as autonomous and existing prior to experience has been strongly critiqued for decades (Braidotti 2013; Butler 2011; Merleau-Ponty 2012; Wolfe 2010), and some have argued that practices of attending to subjectivity as a practice of self-care extends back to the Greeks (Foucault 2000). Guattari’s perspective on the constitution of subjectivity is important to this paper because it offers an understanding of subjectivity as comprised of psychic, social, and material components of subjectification (2000, 24 italics in original), the three broad domains of the three ecologies. The boundaries between the three ecologies are ambiguous, but the important point is that ‘individual’ psychic life is personal, but it is also social and material. ‘Interiority’, the experience of being an I, ‘establishes itself at the crossroads of multiple components’ (2000, 36), and it is an interiority that is always in flux. Therefore, the experience of subjectivity is an effect, not a starting point.

An ecosophical subjectivity is then a subjective praxis that attends to how the different ecological registers overlap in the production of self. All kinds of different materials can be considered as contributing to one’s sense of self including, ‘affect, signification, materiality, intensity and desire’ (Shaw 2015, 165). An ecosophical perspective on subjectivity broadens the self beyond the individual
and opens it to the world. Attention is drawn to how the self through which one experiences the world is itself structured by the overlapping material and social worlds. Given this attention to the diversity of components of subjectification, ecological impoverishment comes to signal not only the obvious threat of undermining the material basis of human life, but also how the possibilities for subjectivity become limited by decreasing the richness and diversity of the available components of subjectification. Furthermore, subjectivity is understood as a site of resistance and liberation, the psyche is where the ‘revolution begins: you are a fascist or a revolutionary with yourself first’ (Guattari 2009, 39). Coming to experience oneself as produced through these many nonhuman components is a crucial step in understanding socio-ecological crisis as more than one affecting the ‘external’ environment.

Val Plumwood’s work adds an inter-species ethical focus to ecosophy and draws attention to the other beings with whom one can interact (Plumwood 2002, 2013; Rose 2013). While Guattari has little to say about more-than-human subjectivity, one of Plumwood’s central concerns is developing an animistic sense of nonhuman others, meaning recognizing others and the earth itself as subjects. Plumwood writes about repairing the ‘hyperseparation’ of mind and matter, human and nature, which she diagnoses as endemic to Western thought. She writes, ‘when we hyperseparate ourselves from nature and reduce it conceptually, we not only lose the ability to empathize and to see the non-human sphere in ethical terms, but also get a false sense of our own character and location that includes an illusory sense of agency and autonomy’ (2013, 414). What is particularly valuable about Plumwood’s work is her persistent focus on the task of learning to see nonhuman others and the world itself as subjects with whom one can communicate and be in relationship. She is trying to find the ‘kind of stance a human can take that will open her to a responsive engagement in relation to nonhuman others’ (Rose 2013, 97).

Whereas Guattari is concerned with the constitution of human subjectivity, Plumwood is more focused on how to develop awareness that many kinds of beings possess it and to listen to them. Acknowledging the subjectivity of others, even of the land or earth itself, shifts subjectivity from being a unique human experience to become a condition of life. Opening oneself to a ‘responsive engagement’ with nonhuman subjects is an acknowledgement and invitation for nonhumans to influence and shape human subjectivity not just as components of subjectification but in intersubjective relationship. With Guattari’s perspective that subjectivity is a contingent experience of the coming together of various components, one can begin to appreciate that human bodies, rock bodies, bird bodies, and others will incorporate these components differently, but Plumwood’s philosophy reminds readers that those components do come together in their own way in each body, strengthening the ethical commitment of ecosophy to learn to live in community with the more-than-human world, not simply to avoid our own demise. In both Guattari and Plumwood, there is an argument that subjectivity, human or otherwise, is not something that is fixed and waiting to be discovered. Instead, there are a multitude of ways in which the components of subjectivity can come together and in which one’s sense of self and world can be shaped in relationship with others.

Framing the contemporary vision fast practice with Guattari and Plumwood’s work departs from how nature-based therapies are usually theorized, which is from within the scholarly project called ecospsychology (Fisher 2013; Kahn and Hasbach 2012; Roszak 2001; Roszak, Gomes, and Kanner 1995). It is a critical project that arose in the late twentieth century to draw attention to the psychological impacts of environmental devastation and to argue that confronting climate change is an existential, as well as technical, challenge. In affinity with Plumwood, ecospsychological scholars asserted that we must understand the world as animate – as having a psyche – and the human psyche as intimately connected to the more-than-human world in order to effectively address socio-ecological crisis. However, key texts in the ecospsychological tradition invoke nature as a universal good, a foil to pathological social structures that warp ‘natural’ human development and our relationship with the world (Plotkin 2008, 2010; Shepard 1982). One influential author, who also facilitates fasting ceremonies, frames the issue by writing, ‘many modern cultures have diverged from their origins in nature, resulting in billions of modern lives radically alienated from the natural world and cultures
devoid of the integrity and survival value implicit in natural systems’ (Plotkin 2008, 14). The effect of such a framing is that it reifies the ontological split between nature and culture so that rather than conceptualizing human subjectivity as immanent to earth, readers are instead invited to ‘speculate that Earth is trying to imagine its own future through us’ (Plotkin 2008, 17).

My intention in this paper is not to engage in a specific debate with the ecopsychological literature. Instead, I want to demonstrate that an interpretation of the vision fast ceremony guided by non-essential senses of both nature and the human self actually offers a more rich account of what is at play and at stake in the practice. I hope that my account contributes to the development of ecosophical geographies as a means through which to interpret nature-based therapeutic practices that complements geography’s rich tradition of detailing the mutual constitution of nature and society (Harvey 1996; Peet and Watts 1996; Robbins 2012; Semple 1911; Smith 2008).

I now shift to a detailed discussion of Anna’s experience with her fast in order to consider how practices like the contemporary vision fast ceremony contribute to an experience of the human self as produced in immanent relationship with the more-than-human world, and how the practice might contribute to the practice of ecosophy as a therapeutic intervention for the alienation, loneliness, and melancholia that so many people feel when confronted with unfolding socio-ecological crisis (Barrows 1995; Lertzman 2015; Macy 1995).

Anna’s story

I met Anna, whose story was first introduced in this paper’s preamble, when she was a participant on a month-long vision fast guide training programme. Anna arrived at our campground in the Inyos saturated in grief. In the last year, she cared for her mother as she died, witnessed her mother-in-law’s death soon after, and was wracked with the loss of multiple pregnancies. She described herself as feeling ‘empty and fallow’. Asked what brought her here, Anna replied that she came in search of magic, a purpose, a way forward to nurture the life she so desperately wanted to bring into the world.

For our four-day fast, our group left the forest service campground where we had gathered and followed a two track southeast towards Death Valley. Maybe 15 miles from pavement as the crow flies, our slow 2-hour winding drive into the mountains gave us the feeling of remoteness and distance. We established our basecamp in a large valley covered in scrubby sagebrush. A dry wash led the way back west towards the road. To the east and the north a steep ridge rose several hundred feet above the valley floor and created a border on two sides. Twelve of us fasters struck out from here to each establish our solo camps.

While my own fast called me to a place far from the others, Anna chose to tuck into a spot on the far side of a small ridge near basecamp. She found this unusual, describing herself as someone who would usually choose a distant spot far from the others, but she chose to follow her intuition and stayed close. During her solo, Anna felt flat and bored, isolated, like she could not make contact with the other creatures that must be sharing her desert landscape. ‘Where is everybody?’ she asked.

One day, Anna found a pile of tiny white bones lying in a pile of rocks. ‘Someone has been eating the rodents’, she thought. She noted how perfectly clean the bones were. They reminded her of a dream she had shortly before the fast. She had just lost another pregnancy. In the dream, a ball of white light came out of her body, fell to the floor, and cracked open. Anna saw a beating heart that then ‘desiccated’ and turned into the pile of tiny white bones, leaving her with a feeling of awe. She described them as ‘perfect, so beautifully alive but not’.

Anna collected the physical bones she found on her fast and used them as part of a ceremony she designed for herself, what she called a grief mandala:

I dug a pit, lined it with juniper duff and berries, placed a bird’s nest, the bones, and eggshells in the pit. I placed rocks pointing to the four directions around the edge and filled the pit with the dead wood of life. I then named my griefs: miscarriage, loss of a close friendship, my mother’s death, not having meaningful work. It was good to name the griefs and let them be there.
On the fourth morning, Anna woke to the howl of a coyote at first light, sparking a feeling of joy. She said, 'I felt awoken, but in a much bigger way than simply being roused from sleep.' She thought, not knowing quite what 'it' was. Anna walked east full of the energy that had been lacking the last few days, towards the glimmers of first light and where the sun would rise. She felt the 'new clear gold light of the dawn, the cool valley floor, the damp smell of dust and the morning dew'. Anna found small flowers growing that she had not noticed before. She was taken by their color and allowed herself to be absorbed in their scent. She found heart shaped rocks in her path that reminded her of similar ones that her mother used to collect, and she saw bees crawling in the flowers. 'It felt so different than the other days.' Anna said, 'I wanted to write a letter to the fairies, to the spirits. A letter to say I want to be a mother, that I believe in magic'. While collecting blossoms to make an offering circle for her letter, a bird entered the circle she had constructed. She recalled, 'I wanted to feed the bird, so I wrote the letter, made my offering, and read it aloud'. The sun rose and Anna felt the magic of the moment passing. The remainder of her fast passed uneventfully.

**Mirroring the story**

We returned from our fasts on the morning of the fifth day. Those who had stayed behind welcomed us back with hugs and breakfast. We did not talk much, instead savouring the food and the warmth of human company. I knew how deeply affected and puzzled I was by my experience and I imagined others felt the same. Participants often return from their fasts bewildered by the experience. Fasts can be unexpectedly difficult and few participants have clear moments of epiphany or inspiration. More common are lengthy periods of boredom and anxiety punctuated by moments that stand out but whose significance remains ambiguous. Guides encourage participants to 'hold your stories close', to not say too much or try to make sense of the experience right away. Betsy, a school guide, says, 'if meaning is rushed, that’s just the ego kicking in and imposing meaning'.

Over the course of the next three days, we each shared a story from our fast with the group. Each of us took 20 minutes to tell our story and the guides took as much time to mirror it back. In my experience, the stories come to life during mirroring. Participants often start their story saying, 'I don’t know where this is going to go', or 'nothing happened out there', and then proceed to tearfully recount snapshots of their experience on the fast. The apparently simple gesture of being listened to and having one’s experience affirmed often turns out to be an intensely emotional experience. When the guide tells back a portion of the story, the faster then experiences their own story in a new way, what Betsy, a senior guide at the school, describes as the ‘threshold between two worlds’.

Storytelling and mirroring are techniques to help develop the meaning of stories. It is a signature practice of the school, which has slowly evolved as a way to give the experience of fasting meaning and context. Solos deeply affect most participants, but the ability to give the experience language and to place it in a more-than-human existential and ethical context can be elusive. Joseph, another long-time guide, describes mirroring as an attempt to answer the question, ‘what is it to love and honor people when they return from their fast when we have no agreed upon mythology or social structure? Mirroring then is an improvisational mythology. Our responsibility is to be loving stewards of the land and the people’. Joseph is gesturing at the aspirational nature of this practice. Without a strong cultural context that affirms human identity as rooted in the land, mirroring has developed as one way to draw that connection out and to affirm the participants’ experience.

Mirroring is rarely a straightforward reflection. More often, the guide will follow a particular theme or character in the story. They weave myth and narrative, personal experience, the land, and the roles of nonhuman others together as they mirror the story back to the faster. In my experience, mirrors work to both affirm the storyteller as a person and to move the story from the realm of the individual psyche into that of the group and the land. Mirroring can be quiet or dramatic, sweet or confrontational, but it almost always holds the entire group’s attention close and this atmosphere feeds the process.
Anna was quiet upon returning from her fast and appeared to take seriously the encouragement to hold her story close. She waited until nearly everyone else had shared their story before offering her own. The narrative of her experience on the fast that I told above is recounted from what Anna shared in the mirroring circle. When she began to share she appeared reticent, describing her uncertainty in approaching the fast. As her story unfolded, Anna relaxed, though she remained quiet and matter of fact throughout the telling.

The feeling tone shifted as Betsy rose to mirror Anna’s story. Betsy recounted the sunrise of the fourth morning and Anna’s tears began to flow when Betsy touched her shoulder with a piece of Bristlecone pine from those nearby ancient trees, saying, ‘if it can’t be ordinary, it can’t be magic’. Through her words and gesture, Betsy invoked the everyday wonder of the rising sun and the idea of ancestry. She went on to animate the bones in the story. Betsy said,

the heart of magic beats inside you. The bones are the bones of your ancestors. Your children are your ancestors now because they are dead. Just because they never grew up doesn’t mean they aren’t your ancestors. You wouldn’t be sitting here if not for those tiny bones. They brought you to this circle, those bones that came out of your body, they have inspired you. You sat solidly in the circle of grief, you felt deeply into the land.

Betsy’s mirroring unfolded in a more-than-human social context. By following an individual thread in Anna’s story – the bones she found through to the lifting of her grief with the sunrise on the fourth morning – Betsy’s mirroring validated Anna’s grief and affirmed her desire for motherhood. Telling the story through the bones, the bristlecone, and the ‘ordinary magic’ of the sunrise wove it through the land, affirming its authorship beyond an internal psychic process projected outward. The attention and empathy of the other participants along with the invocation of the space maintained as sacred through decades of fasts and stories helped to allow the emotional tenor to rise in the way that it did.

In an interview conducted a year after her fast, Anna recounted that she had come to understand that sunrise as central to her experience of the ceremony. At times during the fast she felt as if she had just been going through the motions. Even the grief mandala and the letter to the spirits she described as feeling somewhat flat. However, the magic of that sunrise has come to mean the ability to feel the everyday magic of the world and to reconnect with her sense of hope, to let go of grief as a pervasive feeling.

Towards interpretation

Part translation, part interpretive creation, here I offer some ideas about how Anna’s story can speak to this special issue’s project of beginning to understand and articulate ecosophical geographies. In Anna’s story is a narrative of the confusing and challenging process of experimenting with subjectivity as collectively produced in relationship with nonhuman others, many of whom speak in unfamiliar ways. This is an act of interpretation that is not a process of decoding, but is instead about following the ‘trajectory’ of the elements of a story ‘to see if they can serve as indicators for new universes of reference’ (Guattari 2009, 66). The meaning of the more-than-human elements in Anna’s story are not fixed, but by paying attention to the ways in which they shaped Anna’s experience, their own subjectivity and Anna’s can be elaborated in a more specific way. This is to approach subjectivity like ‘constructing a work of art,’ something with which to have a ‘creative rapport’ (67). The materials of this work of art are the many components of subjectification in Anna’s story and her intersubjective encounters with the landscape and other creatures. My intent here is to draw attention to some of the ways in which an animate more-than-human world, perceptually enlivened by the ceremony, opened up novel ways for Anna to understand and experience her own subjectivity.

Encouraged and given the space to allow her thoughts and feelings to be more than her own, Anna’s psyche spills onto the landscape. The bones, for example, evoke both her loss and the presence of others in her world. ‘So beautifully alive but not’, the bones live in Anna’s story as part of
her – her grief or perhaps her miscarried children – but also as alive in their own sense. Betsy’s remark that the bones, ‘brought you to this circle’, hails their animacy. The bones drew Anna to them, one of countless details in the desert landscape who nevertheless became a central character in the story of her fast. Yet their life is also elusive. What sort of body they lived in, the quality of that being’s life, and the terms of its death all remain a mystery. In tending to her grief and inquiring into the life of the bones, Anna offers us a glimpse of the bones both as one part of herself and as a separate subject with whom she is in relationship. Anna’s psyche never becomes quite continuous with the land, but difference is not so great as to preclude communication and co-creation.

Anna’s experience with the bones demonstrates the tension between continuity and difference at work in her story. In a striking way, Anna’s subjectivity is continuous with the bones. They are her in the sense that they live in the story as her children and inhabit her dreams. And yet, the bones act on Anna as well, calling for her attention, shaping her experience by focusing it on themselves, a small detail in a vast landscape that others may never have noticed. They are both Anna and exceed her in mysterious ways. With Plumwood’s thought in mind, Anna’s effort to listen to the bones, to understand what they have to say, is an acknowledgement of their autonomous being, ‘mysterious but never mindless’ (Rose 2013, 94). Thus, they signal both how the self can be worked on as continuous with the world but also that while the borders between self and other are not clear, acknowledging the difference and agency of more-than-human others allows for a more creative shaping of one’s own subjectivity.

Beyond the bones, the more subtle play of the relationship between Anna’s ‘own’ emotions and what she experiences in the desert landscape gesture towards an awareness of how components of subjectivity come together in individual experience. As Anna experiences lethargy and feels fallow, the desert that she experiences is largely empty and lonely. Later, the coyote’s yip, the pre-dawn light, and the flowers that she finds both signal and make possible her shift in energy and her sense of possibility. The relationships here are ambiguous. There is no neat process of causation in which one element of Anna’s story determines her experience, but each component contributes to crafting a narrative of ecosophical subjectivity in which perception, emotion, and personal experience drift beyond the bounds of individuals. If one were to read Anna’s story through a more traditional psychological lens, the moods of the desert, the light, and even the flowers’ ‘appearance’ might be read as projections, as Anna’s subjective emotions displaced onto the landscape. There is likely some truth in that interpretation. ‘Nature always wears the colours of the spirit’ (Emerson 1849, 8), meaning that what one brings to the scene will undoubtedly colour what is found.

And yet, personalizing too much what Anna found in the desert landscape assumes that her identity is produced autonomously and denies subjectivity to the other elements. Guattari writes, ‘the concentration of attention upon a certain kind of object is part of the production of subjectivity’ (Guattari 2009, 75). He writes this line in the context of critique, arguing that giving one’s attention to mass media, especially television, structures the way that one perceives, and shapes subjectivity so as to be ‘compatible to social conditions’, but the assertion can be turned a bit to open up new possibilities. By turning to the desert and its more-than-human communities, Anna begins to reshape the ways in which her subjectivity is produced. Rather than turning inwards, excavating the psyche as might happen in a traditional counselling relationship, Anna opens her perceptual faculties to the surrounding landscape, and the ceremonial framing allows the ‘magic’ to unfold, for what might be taken as seemingly random events to be held significant. While the lethargic and fallow feeling of the desert are not simply waiting to be found by Anna, they are affects that exceed her own being. Furthermore, experiencing them as material elements of the world affords her a different relationship to lethargy, boredom, and fallowness. They are both her own and she is granted a bit of distance from them; she explores the lonely desert landscape and does not just inhabit her own being as lonely and fallow. As both therapeutic technique and an assertion about the constitution of subjectivity, working with these components shifted Anna’s experience of her interwoven self and the landscape.
Anna’s story outlines some of the methods for opening a space to acknowledge and pay attention to nonhuman others as subjects and to human subjectivity as developing through many components that extend beyond the individual. The marking of ceremonial space as a willing suspension of disbelief, temporary retreat from human communities, subtly altering consciousness through fasting, storytelling, and mirroring all form a technique to experience self and world in this animate way.\(^2\)

Given how disorienting and enigmatic the experience of the contemporary vision fast tends to be, the shared practices of storytelling and mirroring are essential to this care of ecosophical subjectivity. When Joseph says, ‘our responsibility is to be loving stewards of the land and the people’, he is acknowledging an ethical obligation to re-story the land and human subjectivity as immanent to each other. The disenchantment of the world helped to make possible the ethical justification for its exploitation (Heidegger [1954] 2008; Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2001; Weber [1916] 1946). Attending to its animate nature in the story telling and mirroring circles helps to re-establish the ethical bonds between the land and the people who guide and participate in the vision fast. Mirroring adds a human social component to the constitution of subjectivity. The close attention that guides and other participants give to a story being told helps to validate its importance and to affirm the story as meaningful. When guides follow the trajectory of certain themes or elements in a story the result is often that the storyteller and the group become more attuned to the way in which enigmatic components of the story participate in who the storyteller has become through the experience. Though the fast itself is experienced in solitude from other people, this social element is crucial to the significance that the fast takes on in the life of the participant.

Mirroring is an always uncertain process. Joseph told me that he once asked one of his mentors how he knew what a nonhuman creature was saying to him. The man replied, ‘I ask it a question and wait for the first thought that pops into my head. That’s usually his answer’. Joseph, despite decades of immersion in this practice, does not share his confidence. When hummingbirds hovered nearby while Anna was telling her story, Joseph drew attention to their presence in his mirroring and reminded Kika of the in her story, but he refrained from ascribing any particular meaning to their arrival. Instead, his acknowledgement of them underscored both their importance to Anna and her story as well as their mystery. However, his comments echoed the spirit of Plumwood’s writing when he chose to depict their appearance in the ‘active voice’, describing them as participants who may have chosen to be there for particular reasons, and he refused to write off their attendance at Anna’s story as ‘meaningless accident’ (Plumwood 2013, 451).

Here, the therapeutic ethos of this ecosophy becomes more clear. The fast itself and the experience of mirroring re-story subjectivity as an experienced effect of many components rather than existing within the individual prior to experience. It is a narration of existential inquiry as an applied ethics of naming and trying to tend to the more-than-human nature of human subjectivity and the personhood of nonhumans. Mirroring weaves together human and nonhuman elements, and it also creates a shared space in which the ‘reality’ of the experience is confirmed in the presence of all participants. Anna’s experience appeared to be powerful and moving to her in and of itself, but its meaning clearly blossomed through Betsy’s mirroring and the affirmation of her experience by the rest of the group. It helps to affirm one’s identity as bound up in the landscape.

**Concern for the old ways**

Readers familiar with Guattari’s work might imagine him having little patience with the practice of the contemporary vision fast or this interpretation of it. After all, he hoped to move ecosophy beyond a ‘small nature-loving minority’, insisting that it is ‘too important to be left some of its usual archaizers and folklorists’ (2000, 35). Others share his suspicion of the ‘nostalgia wing’ of ecological thinking (Smith 2008) and might be inclined to write off the practice as ‘another dream of Walden Pond’ (Genosko 2009, 79), meaning that it could be seen as a utopian retreat with little relevance to the complex realities of contemporary socio-ecological crisis. Guattari writes, ‘Obviously it would be inconceivable to try and go back to the old formulas, which relate to periods when the planet was far
less densely populated and when social relations were much stronger than they are today (2000, 34). And the practice of fasting alone in wild places is an old formula, one of the oldest known forms of initiation and spiritual retreat (Whitley et al. 1999).

In response, I suggest that there is a dual movement at play in the contemporary vision fast between what practitioners call the ‘old ways’ and a creative drive that incorporates contemporary influences, which is how it thrives. Many, including Plumwood, have argued that leaving behind the old ways or insisting on the novelty of developing a more-than-human understanding and experience of subjectivity effects a further erasure of indigenous knowledge and traditions (Collard, Dempsey, and Sundberg 2015; Sundberg 2014; Todd 2014). Rather than write off the ‘old formulas,’ as Guattari argued, the important task is to learn how to be in conversation with them while constantly retuning both knowledge and practice for contemporary contexts. On a conceptual level, this is what I have tried to accomplish by pairing Guattari and Plumwood. Both were students of the Western philosophical canon. Guattari understood his project as charging forwards, breaking with tradition. Plumwood looked to indigenous philosophies, steeped in longstanding relationships to particular places, to develop her arguments for animate understanding of earth and nonhuman others. By pairing them, I have attempted to show that simultaneous inquiry into long held philosophies of an animate earth along with an understanding of human subjectivity as widely diffused allows for a richer understanding of the practice at hand than either perspective would on its own.

The dual movement of learning from traditions that have been practiced for millenia while situating it in a contemporary context is also evident in the evolution of the contemporary vision fast practice. Though described by the school as a ‘pan-cultural rite of passage’, the significant influence of Native American traditions is evident. Native American nations across the continent have long practiced some form of solo fast as an initiation into adulthood (Benedict 1922), and archaeological evidence suggests people have been performing similar ceremonies in the American West for 10,000 years (Whitley et al. 1999). The school’s founders were mentored by Native American practitioners. This was at a time, the 1970s and 1980s, when interest in Native American spirituality was running high in American culture and contentious Native American politics were frequently in the news. At the same time that local Paiute elders trained the school’s founders and gave them permission to run their programmes on Paiute lands, the American Indian movement was fighting for recognition and redress of the multiple continued oppressions of Native Americans. Activists frequently pointed out that white culture seemed more interested in Native Americans as an historical object than a contemporary political force. Whites who want to learn about Native American spirituality have then sometimes been dismissed as ‘new age consumers’ commodifying Native American traditions (Aldred 2000). Native Americans who teach beyond the boundaries of their communities have been called ‘plastic shamans’, a mean-spirited insult that can be either an accusation of charlatanism or of sharing spiritual practices without permission from the community (Churchill 2003; Deloria 2003). In the 1980s, some in the American Indian Movement went so far as to declare ‘war’ on these so-called plastic shamans (Sovereign Dine Nation 2003), and accusations of cultural appropriation are still occasionally directed at the school.

Other important influences, however, also shape the school’s work. Several psychologists and psychotherapists work at the school and they utilize the techniques of both Jungian psychology and existential psychotherapy (Jung and von Franz 1964; Rogers 1961; Yalom 2009). Jungian archetypes offer a treasure chest for inquiries into human nature that go far beyond the cognitive-behavioural models that dominate much of contemporary psychotherapy and connect well with one of the school founders’ academic training in mythological traditions. Existential psychotherapy offer a view of healing relationships based in affirmation of the individual’s capacity for self-healing. The American wilderness tradition is also an important influence. Turning to nature for healing, insight, or as a counterweight to society are all American traditions. Figures as varied as Thoreau, Mary Austin, and Edward Abbey undertook solo wilderness trips as both physical adventures and psychic journeys and the work of SOLB should also be understood in that vein (Abbey 1968; Austin 1987; Thoreau 1993).
What I have found to be at play in the practice of the vision fast ceremony is the use of a form with deep history that is given further shape by the socio-spatially specific influences of counselling and the American wilderness tradition. To write off ecosophical practices like this fast simply because they can be read as nostalgic would be a mistake. Instead, by bringing to the school’s work a perspective on subjectivity that understands it as continually in process, rather than something to be found, scholarly analyses can help to inform it as an effort to develop new subjectivities that can meet contemporary challenges rather than as a nostalgic return.

Conclusion

The contemporary vision fast ceremony is by no means a complete answer to the question of ecosophical subjectivity. As a microsocial exercise, it has the capacity to encourage dissensus, subjectivities that break with the dominant homogenous form, but it has no necessary structural impact. Participants return to lives that might be deeply alienating and the practice can even be co-opted as a refuge, a place and practice to retreat to but that does not effect a lasting shift in how participants understand and inhabit their world. This is one reason why critical reflections on ecosophical practices ought to contribute to their development. The discourse that circulates will impact both the sense of possibility found in the practice and the type of affirmation participants find in their broader communities.

I close by considering the final words of, The Three Ecologies:

The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains—the catalyst for a gradual reforging and renewal of humanity’s confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level (Guattari 2000, 45).

I feel comfortable claiming that the contemporary vision fast practice contributes to ‘the reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy’ at the level of subjectivity. It can even be a ‘catalyst for a gradual re-forging and renewal of humanity’s confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level’. However, it requires social tending to articulate the practice in relationship to a broader ethics of care and the politics of ecological struggle. This is a delicate task as defining a practice like the contemporary vision fast in relationship to these broader issues risks casting it in a prescriptive tone that could evacuate some of its creative potential. But, given how poorly valued practices that attend to subjectivity are in relation to technological and ideological interventions, practices that care for ecosophical subjectivity will have to be articulated and defended, not simply left to simmer on their own.

In this essay, I have attempted to offer one answer to the question, how can ecosophical subjectivities be nourished and given the space to develop? Through ethnographic narrative and the theoretical lenses of Guattari’s ecosophy and Plumwood’s philosophical animism I have described the contemporary vision fast ceremony as one way to experiment with an earth-bound ecosophy lived in relationship with a more-than-human world. Rooted in traditions that gesture towards humanity’s deep history, the practice requires constant attunement to contemporary conditions. The contemporary vision fast ceremony is not the answer to ecological crisis. However, as a microsocial practice it challenges the fallacy of the autonomous human self and offers a ground upon which to experiment with an ecosophical self in search of a lived experience of animacy.

Notes

1. For a more thorough discussion of ecosophy, see Shaw and Aiken’s introductory essay in this volume.
2. Other geographers have also begun to elaborate a ‘methodology of attending’ that they understand as both an ontological project of animating the world and an ethics of care through the tending to experiences of individual subjectivity as arising from this animate world. It is a way to ‘co-create meaning’ with others even though a full understanding of those others may always be beyond reach (Country et al. 2015, 276).
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