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ecopoetics

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The whole of language must be thoroughly plowed up. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

I met a plow on my first going out at my gate the first morning after my arrival & the Plowboy said to the Plowman "Father the Gate is Open"— I have begun to work & find that I can work with greater pleasure than ever. (William Blake, letter 9/23/1800)

It is not by dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them as I would the flowers in my garden. (C.S. Peirce, "Evolutionary Love")

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✳ 1. On Not Giving Up The World ✳

Ecopoetics Groundwork is a conceptual primer for the transdisciplinary enterprise of ecopoetics. Primarily relying on examples rather than abstractions as such, the book aims to do the brain-rewiring required to ground ecopoetics in an anarchist philosophy of open systems. It explores reparative practices that work on and through language and its kinship with complex and evolving ecologies (a good start on a definition of ecopoetics), drawing on the Kabbalistic practice of *tikkun* (repair), which links activism with the more arcane work of meaning-making. Keeping in mind philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's mandate that "the whole of language has to be thoroughly plowed up," groundwork refers to an overturning and opening up of conceptual and imagistic grammar that deconstructs modernist dualities among nature, humanity, and divinity. After this introduction, the chapters follow ecopoetics through the realms of language (Chapter 2), visual art and architecture (3), science (4), religion and mysticism (5), and poetry (6), accompanied by key poetic texts at every turn.

I understand ecopoetics as an emergent field: not simply the current set of poems, books and essays that self-identify with the term, but the potential field that would underwrite (and, in turn, be underwritten by) a new organization of authority— since ecopoetics is outside the modern regime of disciplinary authority.

What you get when you make a deal with the devil of disciplinarity is authority over a marked-out domain; what you give up is *the world*. Art and literature are set up as an exemplary realm of aesthetic experience but thereby disqualified as anything else— for example, as anything like scientific knowledge or religion. If you aren't willing to give up the world, you will have to reckon with the illegitimacy that comes with this refusal, but it enables you to come to poems without knowing to what kind of world-making they might lend themselves. In this book, as you'll see, I translate poems into philosophical and ecological manifestos, along with a range of other ways of engaging poems that, as a literary critic, I was taught not to do. Though the segregation of art and literature from other discursive domains has always been a way of burying and neutralizing the kind of knowledge one can find and make there, I turn to poetry and art here with the intent to unbury and re-activate.

Now that we're in the choppy waters between paradigms— the ongoing end of modernity, a dangerous time with hellish and utopian possibilities— when what counts as science, art, religion, and philosophy

is getting more complicated— it is at least possible that knowledges and their objects can be leveraged and transformed. It is still as difficult (one might say quixotic, misguided, delusional) to contribute to scientific knowledge by studying poems as it is to worship the embodied processes of physics and biology. My extreme shorthand version of how to do this doesn't depend on believing or not believing in God but on learning how not to believe in nature. I would like to elevate this to an ecopoetical principle. The slightly longer version is that ecopoetics, as I understand it, is the project of dismantling the distinctions among the categories of *nature, divinity, and humanity.*

�֍ 2. Collaborative Meaning Making �֍

I begin with a bit of a poem, the way a rabbi or preacher would start with a biblical verse. Today's sermon is drawn from Wallace Stevens' massively canonical poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," in which two men philosophize as they watch and listen to a woman singing at the seaside, and they are struck by the sense that

> ...there was no world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

The men are trying to come to terms with what, if anything, the singing (standing for art, language and consciousness generally) does to the world— its relationship with the sea, and the question of who dances to whose tune. As in Stevens' poem "Anecdote of the Jar," in which the simple placement of an empty glass jar on a hill somehow organizes the wilderness around it and takes "dominion everywhere," the effect of the woman's singing is both vanishingly subtle and total; the sea and the night sky are harmonized, enchanted, and thrown into mystical perspective by it.

What can be the effect of human meaning-making on the world, and how do language and art participate in shaping it? An open, high-stakes question for us in the 21st century, and for ecopoetics.

Part of the point of Stevens' poem seems to be how philosophy— which Stevens codes as masculine— falls short of art— which he codes as feminine— but the poet, by folding philosophy back into art in the form of the poem, manages to perform a transcending synthesis. It's an old Wordsworthian move: a kind of dialectical masculinism, starting with

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the binary distinctions of culture (singer) and nature (sea). The poet is the woman singing and the men philosophizing.

Or does he attribute this synthesis to the singer?

It's hard to tell.

The point of "no world for her / Except the one she sang" seems to be that consciousness and language alienate us from the natural world (we are "an unhappy people in a happy world" as Stevens put it elsewhere) and we are thus obliged to make our own world. If singing were a mere elaboration of the rhythms of human breathing, it would remain a sibling phenomenon with the waves, a "heaving speech of air, a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end," where summer (typically for Stevens) represents the happy and unalienated natural world. So the poem seems to be advancing the (familiar) proposition that human meaning is made in an otherwise meaningless world— an existentialist idea of how we are challenged to embrace our radical freedom in world-making. Again, this seems to be a replay of the Wordsworthian account of "how the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells" and is "exalted" further to realize itself as being "of quality and fabric more divine." Wordsworth encodes the proposition in quantitative and comparative terms ("more beautiful" and "more divine"): language and consciousness are emergent phenomena, arising from but transcending the natural world. This proposition is part of what Romanticism built into the concept of nature, making it an almost insurmountable conceptual obstacle to the understanding we are trying to access here. This is also why "natural supernaturalism" and "religious naturalism"—forms of secular religion— are part of the problem— why they are so accommodating to the modernity they may seem to oppose.

In Stevens' poem, the ordering performed by art is cast as a deepening of the world, as when the tilting (physical) masts of sailboats at harbor seem to extend into (imaginary) perspective lines that deepen the night, as if they were positing castles in the air, spiritualizing the world with "ghostlier demarcations" as with the singer's "keener sounds." As in Wordsworth, the punchline seems to be that the human and even the divine are not different in kind from the natural but in degree (keener, ghostlier). This proposition was radical in Wordsworth's time for displacing the hierarchical and stable-for-all-eternity order-of-things embodied in a Great Chain of Being based on differences in kind (as between aristocrats and commoners). Even so, the new order recuperates hierarchy in a dynamic capitalist system in which the middle class

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constantly earns its dominance as a difference in degree. You get the formula over and over in Wordsworth, as in his famous definition of a poet as "a man speaking to men" but— wait for it— also a man "endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul." Again, note the assertion of no difference in kind (though again coded as masculine) followed by repeated insistence on difference in degree that comes as a kind of backlash (or as Orwell put it, "some are more equal than others").

This leaves for us the still-unfinished project of (1) rejection of the recuperated hierarchy (via what can be called anarchism) and (2) reopening the possibility of thinking and enacting equality with radical difference. For this we need to set Wordsworth aside and turn to someone like Blake, whose life's work can be understood in terms of these projects.

In its masculinism and modernism and humanist triumphalism, Stevens' poem telegraphs its limitations, but in so doing, it points beyond: "meaning indicates the direction in which it fails."

The beyond appears in what might be Stevens' last poem, "Of Mere Being" (to which I return briefly in Chapter 3), where human meaning and reason are entirely displaced as the poem beatifically confronts an otherness at the heart of meaning, this time in the form of an other-worldly bird of paradise and its song. This is a version of an otherness I have engaged again and again in this book: in the constellation of animals, humans, monsters and divinities that make up Rome's Trevi Fountain (Chapter 3), the sea monster Leviathan and a host of other creatures real and fantastic in the book of Job (Chapter 5) and the menagerie of oracular animals in Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (Chapter 6).

Without denying the psychological resonance of an existential loneliness in which there is no world for us but what we make, this book starts from another premise altogether: that the world is full of meaning, and that meaning and complexity are primordial.

Meaning, as I understand it, is how things— often incommensurable things at several removes— matter to each other. This is how systems evolve; it is an almost tautological account of ecology, and it makes the relationship of language to the world kin to the relationships of other creatures and systems. I will not belabor this point since I have written about it extensively elsewhere, but if you like official-sounding names, you can file it as a form of anti-reductionism: simple elements don't come first and get distributed into complex patterns; patterns and the elements differentiated by patterning co-evolve. The reflective capacity of the mind

draws on the same recursivity that builds the world, making the gemlike drop of dew that reflects the world (a favorite image of consciousness and language in metaphysical poetry) more complex than the world it reflects, and making the languaged world more plural for its keener and ghostlier inhabitations.

Accordingly, while rejecting the humanist/existentialist assertion that humans make meaning in a meaningless world, I think it is important also to reject the Nietzschean argument that humans come along belatedly as a dispensable afterthought in a universe or an ecology that is already full without us. How could you have respect for the sanctity of any life if you don't include your own (and vice versa)? The slightly longer way of putting this is that, just as a universe in which forces and particles and larger structures have evolved as they have in our universe is fundamentally different than one in which they have evolved differently, a universe with consciousness and language in it is also fundamentally different than one without. This position differs from the humanist exceptionalism of Wordsworth and Stevens: we are co-players and co-makers. So to Stevens' narrator's assertion that "she was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang," I'm tempted just to scrawl *NO* in the margin, or to suggest a rewrite: "they were a multiple co-maker of the world in which they sang."

ASIDE: The Single Artificer. Why does Stevens make such an obviously wrong assertion as "she was the single artificer"? Because one needs it as a mythic manifesto in order to claim a kind of godlike sovereignty for the artist? Why does existentialism insist so obviously wrongly on radical freedom? It's crazy, right? Or do we need this fantasy in order to wrest even a modicum of our own agency from an otherwise all-powerful world, like a surfer on a tsunami? There is a more sophisticated way of justifying the assertion with systems theory's account of the simultaneous openness and closure of complex systems. Again, because I've written extensively about this elsewhere, here's a super-condensed example. Language, in which we build a model of the world, is built entirely of its own differences: the sounds by which one word is distinguished from another in a given language (like the way one word is defined against another) don't signify much, if anything, in the world at large, even though they are physical sounds like any other physical sounds in the world. We can say much the same about the intricate double-helical arrangements of the four chemicals of DNA, but as you may have noticed, it is both deeply right and deeply wrong to say that "we" are the single artificer of these (as right and wrong as saying they are the single artificer of us). To go further with this you need to start dismantling the dualistic opposition of openness and closure as they are definitive for systems that make their own components.

ASIDE: The Practice of Ecopoetics. Of all the things literary critics aren't supposed to do, rewriting the poem is high on the list. I tried it with "The Idea of Order at Key West" but only got as far as a title— "The Practice of Ecopoiesis in the North Woods" (I'm from Minnesota, I've never been to Florida, and I don't have much of a vibe with the seaside, so I had to change it)— and a couple of gangly stanzas. Here and subsequently, I use the term *ecopoiesis* (often used more restrictively to mean *the making of ecosystems*) to suggest the kinship between human meaning-making (never ours alone) with system-formation and related kinds of making and emergence in nature.

> They sang among the genius of the trees.
> The forest may or may not have been paying attention,
> Speaking, while they sang, its many other languages—
> Chemical and otherwise— whether its swaying and soughing
> Constituted a language, even the spacing of the branches
> And of the trees were part of their intelligence, and we,
> Walking there, felt their kinship and their otherness,
> Human, wild, and divine: creatures and creators of each other.

> Their voice gave back to the echoing woods their multiplicity
> And resonance. Among the biosemiotic processes at work
> Beneath the starry tent of sky (elephants paraded trunk-to-tail,
> Tigers jumping through the burning hoops, the clown car
> Gorging and disgorging its contents like a mad siphonophore)
> They were not ringmaster, though they were a multiple co-maker
> Of the worlds in which they sang. And when they sang, we knew
> The trees had terraformed the world in which they sang,
> Sequestered carbon, breathed out oxygen enough for us to sing
> And to philosophize. We also knew: unless our meaning-making
> Lives its kinship out with theirs, there soon will be no world for us.

When you level the playing field, the kinds of difference that went toward defining the layers of a vertical hierarchy come to inform the horizontal differences among the players: convulsive ripples of humanity, divinity, and creaturehood pass through us all. We make meaning the way plants make life out of dirt, water, and sunlight— and just as plants terraformed the planet by doing so (such as by oxygenating the atmosphere), so too our meaning-making transforms the world for good and ill— more for ill unless that realization goes toward affirming the kinship of our meaning-making with what plants do.

ASIDE: The Idea of Order. In a Jorge Luis Borges short story, a secret society has, over many generations, assembled an encyclopedia of a fictional planet called Tlön. When the encyclopedia is discovered, earthly reality begins to

be displaced and remade in the image of Tlön. To the zealots in their "rage for order," "it is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws - I translate: inhuman laws - which we never quite grasp" while the new world is "a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men. . . . Enchanted by its rigor, humanity forgets over and again that it is a rigor of chess masters, not of angels." The Idea of Order. The story of capitalist modernity.

As those who study systems tell us, the initial challenge for consciousness and language is not how to find or make whatever meaning we can in an inhospitable desert but to avoid being swamped by the overwhelming fullness of meaning. How much you're tuned into one or the other of these problems probably comes down to how much you're on the depressive or the manic end of the spectrum. If the assertion that the world is full of meaning gave you a warm and fuzzy feeling, you're probably depressive. If it made you anxious, you may be on the manic end. If you bounce from one to the other, then you've noticed that the spectrum is not entirely linear. In any case, if the self is a kind of titration or reducing device, then to suffer from meaninglessness is to be too well defended against meaning.

What does it mean to embrace the principle of the primordiality and excess of meaning as advanced capitalism drains more and more meaning from our lives, amplifying the dark energy pushing all of us and everything apart? The primordiality of meaning seems more mystical and otherworldly— and more urgent— than ever. Reductionism is a survival strategy— the question of how you maintain enough integrity and boundaries to exist— but it becomes stultifying and deadly when it succeeds too well and the question becomes how you can access enough openness and interactivity to evolve and survive. Of course it's hard to affirm your vulnerability and interdependence when you're under attack, but as in a horror film, bolting the doors isn't going to be a winning strategy.

❉ 3. Groundwork ❉

By groundwork I mean plowing, loosening, turning and overturning, opening up. This is the task given to us at this moment: not knowledge production as such, not a foundation or a map. There is no map of the no-man's-land between paradigms.

In case you didn't know, there's not quite any such thing as *ecopoetics*, hence the necessity of groundwork. Ecopoetics is sometimes called an "emergent discipline," but there isn't a consensus on its methods or objects of study. This suits me. If there were a delineated field with degree programs and endowed chairs— or on the other hand, a canonical set of rituals, deities and bake sales— I would have to be an outsider.

Ecopoetics is a transdisciplinary subduction zone where the tectonic plates of knowledges are shifting, the ground is being pulled out from under our feet and new ground is emerging, even if whatever is built here will be in the order of a Buddhist sand mandala.

The kind of groundwork I have in mind is what Wittgenstein meant when he said "the whole of language has to be thoroughly plowed up" and that it's philosophy's job to do so. It's what the spirits meant when they told Yeats they had come to give him metaphors for his poetry— not to deliver epic theory-of-everything diagrams with numbered levels (though Yeats couldn't resist making some of those too, in the way that systematizing mystics do). For Wittgenstein, as for Yeats's spirits, and as for linguist George Lakoff, it is a question of rewiring our brains with alternate metaphors, of accessing other structures of feeling (here, the kind of relationship with sublime difference and otherness mentioned above as enacted in Stevens' "Of Mere Being"), of manufacturing intuition. Metaphors and structures of feeling are "pre-scientific" even though they shape scientific practice, "pre-political" even though they recruit people into political positionalities, and pre- or sub-disciplinary.

ASIDE: Sub-Disciplinarity and Play.
Where are the leading edges of a knowledge formation as it evolves and changes? Some must be at the front, where it pushes forward into non-knowledge, expanding its explanatory range, or running up against obstacles and limits or going around them. Some are along the sides, where it is articulated with other knowledges (the space of interdisciplinarity) and some are internal fractures, where it is articulated with itself (the way a particular field and its subfields are organized). All of these are connected, and repercussions can pass through them all: the transversality of a knowledge formation is the loosely cross-articulated dance of this network of fractures via which the whole thing— like the tectonic plates that comprise the earth's crust— can morph and evolve.

But the
metaphor of leading
edges is limited insofar as it
implies something already-existing that has
enough unity, locality, stability and agency to be a discrete
thing with edges. It falls short of accounting for the most important
edge of a knowledge formation, which would be the bottom edge, where it
emerges from non-knowledge. This is a rough and heterogeneous terrain. It
must include, in no particular order: desire and affect (something you might try
to access by asking someone, *why did you become a scientist?*); paradigms and
metaphors and models in their various forms (which shape knowledge but are
not quite themselves forms of knowledge); all of what you might call the DNA or
the unconscious of a knowledge formation, all the forces that shape it, especially
those that it disavows— for example, the way scientific rationalism continues to be
shaped by capitalist economic rationality, or the way notions of matter and energy
in physics have followed the money form and its tendency to liquidate everything it
can grasp with its stubby little fingers.
While we are learning the content of disciplines, we should also be learning to
find this subdisciplinary edge or surface and to stay there long enough to potentially
reground the knowledge that might be built on it, reproducing and/or altering the DNA
of knowledge. I'm not maintaining that everything we know and teach should be thrown
out the window and new things be put in their place but simply that the center of gravity
needs to shift a little.
Such a shift is still a pretty big deal: just ask an acrobat or a solar system. If you
want to put a knowledge formation on a new footing, you first have to lift it up and
keep it off of you far enough and long enough to give yourself some space to work;
this part of the project can be called *making headroom*. The more disciplinary
legitimacy and authority you have (the more capital investment), the harder this
can be, and the higher the transition costs.
Play is situated at the subdisciplinary edge or surface of knowledge, which
is also where those who belong to multiple disciplines can meet. To theorize
you need beginner's mind. You can't break out of prison horizontally:
that's what's wrong with the model of interdisciplinarity. You first
have to go down and then across— this prison-break strategy
is also groundwork— and you need accomplices. Play
is *transverse* to disciplinarity.

I would call this groundwork philosophical, but that tends to imply a kind of foundationality (as if practice had to wait for theory to hand it a blueprint). It could be called rhetorical, but, in common usage anyway, that tends to imply the opposite: a kind of superficial non-foundationality (as marked in the dismissives "mere rhetoric" and "mere metaphor"). I'd like to call it neurological insofar as it involves rewiring brains with alternate metaphors, or paradigmatic, where paradigms wire together practices and thinking in both directions; either way it works by leveraging.

ASIDE:
Leverage. Kimberly W.
Benston dubbed "trope-a-dope"
the rhetorical strategy of shifting the met-
aphors on which an argument is based to subtly
slide the ground out from under your opponent's
feet, riffing on the tactic Muhammad Ali called "rope-a-
dope," a way of fooling one's opponent in the boxing ring by
allowing oneself to be put "on the ropes." Henry Louis Gates
associated the phrase with how, in traditional African and Af-
rican-American folktales, the trickster monkey is able to defeat
the more powerful lion. The strategy gives you leverage: this is the
right metaphor because (1) it describes the way someone who is
otherwise overmatched can magnify their power; (2) it's how the
entrenched dualism of opposing forces can be opened up and
relativized by a third point or system; and even more funda-
mentally, (3) it is something we can understand in our bodies.
We know what it feels like— from prying something open
by moving a crowbar back and forth all the way up to
complex historical/epistemological phenomena
that might be described as paradigm shifts.
You know how a paradigm shift feels,
don't you?

I've come to think of my literary-critical practice here as guided by commitment to a principle of generosity: you read not to find where you disagree (this is what one learns in graduate school under the heading of *critique*) but how you can interpret a text so that you can agree most fully with it; I would say to find "its truth" but it's more than that. It's how Blake can be right that "everything possible to be believed is an image of truth," and Wittgenstein that "one cannot take too much care in handling philosophical mistakes: they contain so much truth," two more of my mottos here. Although this predisposes me to texts for which I can act as an advocate, texts that have been teachers to me, it does not preclude engaging texts where one's passionate agreements coexist with passionate and even total disagreements (as in my reading of "The Idea of Order"). Maybe the practice of trying to read texts as true is better understood as reading texts as if they could deliver what one wants, one's heart's desire, whatever that may be (the way a love poem is not "about" love but actually delivers it via the quality of attention and labor that has been lavished on it), so here, according to what I want, my practice is to read texts as *sacred*. I began doing this years ago when I realized that I was inclined to read Blake as if his poems were sacred texts for some

future religion, much in the spirit in which he wrote them. (Q. How do you know the spirit in which he wrote them? A. The same way you will come to know how I answer questions like these, which I learned from Blake: I know because *he told me*.) This practice works performatively, which is to say, it actually does the groundwork for such a religion; one could say that such a project is meant to fail (as I've already said, if there were a religion, I'd have to be an apostate) but it may be simpler to say that the groundwork is itself the practice, and that you can have sacred practices and texts without religions and bibles.

When a Daoist is asked by a prince what he learned from the master, he replies enigmatically that "I swept at my master's gate with a broom." This is a way of saying that "if you think you could simply be handed a nugget of wisdom, you are not yet ready to hear the answer anyway." Before you are ready, the Buddha himself could tell you and you wouldn't understand; when you are ready, the answer comes from anywhere and everywhere. As with many parables, the answer to the prince seems both to thwart and to entice; this is part of the technology of parables and koans. How much it entices versus how much it thwarts probably indicates how close to the answer you are. If the prince had been ready to hear it, he might have understood that this performative effect of pushing/pulling is itself the answer and is itself the sweeping— that when you cease anxiously striving to find a path through the master's gate, you find yourself already engaged in "nourishing life." You understand that learning is not about mastery or the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge but about preparation, about maintaining a space— one might call it a receptive or responsive or a sacred space— of openness to evolutionary change. The work of teaching and learning is primarily to create and maintain this space in such a way that you and your students can cultivate this space in yourselves. The writing and reading of a text— the eyes following each line left to right, left to right, left to right, left to right— is also a sweeping at the gate. This is groundwork.

In what is to come, then (to pick a few examples), I read the Trevi fountain as a theological vignette on ecopoetical embodiment, Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" as a manual for how to live in heaven, God's words at the end of the book of Job as, well, God's words— but I am able to do so by agreeing with Blake and Octavia Butler that when the Old Testament God takes off His mask, They turn out to be Gaia.

Of course you could also read paranoid rantings as sacred; it would be painful (as when a method actor plays a serial killer and takes weeks to recover from the role) but you'd find out a lot, quickly and convulsively,

about what kind of god paranoiacs worship. By getting more in touch with your inner paranoia you do run some risk of falling more thoroughly into its orbit, but overcoming dissociation (such as your dissociation from whatever paranoia you discover in yourself in the process) means embracing conflict rather than splitting it off: "this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." My tendency to concentrate on sacred texts comes with the operating principle of *the performativity of attention in conferring value* ("the object of your love is your god," as Lavater put it) and hence the positivity even of critique: extensively critiquing something you think unworthy of attention is counterproductive (as if a stalker were to dog your every movement while shouting *stop following me*) as is operating on the principle that it is necessary to attend carefully to something in order to reject it (the mandate to "know your enemies"). I have thus tried to rely less on what I've realized is one of my favorite constructions "not x but y" to the extent that it tends to reinstate the opposition between x and y more than displace it. But even if I were able to avoid this construction (I'm not), I couldn't escape the contradiction. If rather than saying (for example) that "meaning is not something recondite and rare but something excessively and overwhelmingly present" I leave out the opposition and simply say "meaning is primordial" and focus on exploring what it means to live in such a world (positively trying it on, that is), who's to say I am not still desperately trying to convince my depressive self that this is the case, or dissociating from my depressive self who wakes up every morning in a world devoid of meaning, which is to say, having lost the world? (If you don't know what I mean, listen to the Grateful Dead song "Morning Dew.") I have come to distrust theorizing— including my own— that invests so much in its counterintuitivity— often as opposed to what "we" are cast as accepting as commonsense, and usually as a way of increasing its own value as accessible only to the adept, whether via scientific or spiritual practice. There isn't a single commonsense, and accessing alternative or *undercommonsenses* (the term is Karma Chávez's)— though sometimes abjured or delegitimized but very much alive when you start rooting around— is also groundwork.

Why is it necessary to open up the ground? Although dominant rationality (which is the same thing as the rationality of dominance) is often sold as singular, our everyday repertoires include a menagerie of other rationalities, metaphors, logics,

ASIDE: My Anti-Foundationalist Backstory.

I teach at an art and design school (Pratt Institute) with a longstanding foundation program based in Bauhaus modernism, but increasingly strained by (1) the multiplication of technical knowledges, (2) the breaking apart of any monolithic consensus on "what all artists and designers must know," and (3) the spread of more constellational than territorial models of art/design practice— all of which takes you beyond the question of what particular content or practices are foundational to (4) the question of whether it is possible even in theory to distinguish the foundational from the merely technical, (5) or "breadth" from "depth." I've always loved that the "foundation" met-aphor as an organizing principle is rejected, at Pratt, by none other than the School of Architecture.

Back when I was an undergrad, I dropped out of my art classes at college because of their formalist foundationalism (endless weeks of drawing plywood boxes, not a nude in sight) and then dropped out of art school for the opposite reason (a high-minded "anything goes" ethos that had no time for any teaching of craft and skills, and still no nudes— well, also I couldn't afford the tuition). In my own practices as an artist and theorist, I picked up the tools I needed along the way— anatomy, for example— when prompted by wanting to do things I couldn't yet do— or, more often, simply because they were exciting or enjoyable to use ("I loved you for the beauty of our weapons," as Leonard Cohen put it). There are no foundations! Desire leads the way.

Even so, when after a crooked path I came to be a grad student and then a professor, I started teaching writing as I was taught to do, as a foundationalist: by teaching paragraph and argument structure, and so on. I sucked at it. Fortunately for me, the way writing is taught in high school is so stultifying that the work for college writing professors has to involve a lot of un-teaching. I've become a much better teacher by teaching students how to do all the things they have been told not to do. It's amazing (for example) how much you can expand your grammatical, punctuational, and even cognitive range by trying to write page-long sentences.

and strategies by which we live and think— and we shift among them— and mix and match them— routinely (often looking for resonant intersections at which to plant the tent-stakes of our realities). Mostly because I was trained as a mono-rational-ist (they won't give you a degree unless you can at least do a convincing impersonation), I am inclined to accept the exoticization of alternative rationalities and offer them as sublime or mystical. I'm telling you this upfront, but ultimately it strikes me as more of a stylistic question. In fact, this gambit is only a first step in a deconstructive rethinking pro-cess: (1) the reversal of a dualistic hierarchy between rationalism and

mysticism. The next step is (2) the displacement of the dualism, which involves pluralities, mixings and overlaps of the rational and the mystical/sublime. All kinds of things happen when you start to do this. Even if the rational has been staked out through repression, dispossession and exclusion of other knowledges, these operations do not destroy or banish forever the dangerous knowledge but only keep pushing it away until the self has become capacious or open enough to come to terms with it or to readmit it.

I should also say upfront that it is because I have been taught to make historical claims that I like to say we are at the point where the boundaries among knowledges are being renegotiated (as by the rise of open and nonlinear complex systems in science), where that which was banished to the poetic and the mystical may be cycling back into science— and a version of the same process is happening in religion and poetry as well. In fact, though, this happens all the time— sometimes as a kind of black-market traffic, sometimes via the grandfathering or legitimizing of the traffic (as metaphor was widely disavowed by science before being accepted back as an integral part of thinking and modeling). Thomas Kuhn made a crisp distinction between long periods of "normal science" punctuated by "paradigm shifts," but the crisp distinction is how things look from the "normal science" modality. We abnormals and shifters have another account: (1) that things are always shifting, even though (2) sometimes that may be easier or harder to disavow (modernity), and that, furthermore, nity loves authority and stability, (3) the distinction between the two was never a two-ness but a plurality of mixed and impure positions in the first place.

ASIDE: Blakean Philosophical Origami. This deconstructive sequence (whereby two, by a kind of philosophical origami, is folded into three and four) is a prominent one in Blake's conceptual repertoire. You can find it (for example) in his Marriage of Heaven and Hell, in the assertion that "to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole," or that "it indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out, but the Devils account is, that the Messiah fell & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss."

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Q. So which is it? Are we in some kind of unprecedented shift, or is it always more or less like this? A. If the possibility that we are in the midst of a shift interests you— speaks to your sensibility— or if you think the meta-question of whether shift and nonshift can even be distinguished seems interesting and not just a bit of Jesuitical navel-gazing— then let's have lunch! In other words: we are moving from considering the question as an empirical one (the question of whether it is or isn't the case) into an activist or performative one (how does our under-standing of what it is, or what it could be, shape what it is), which is to say, a political one— how does addressing the question tend to organize us as allies or opponents?

Q. If we already have such wide repertoires— if you are not selling any-thing "new and improved"— why does any work have to be done at all? A. Preaching to the choir is vital to affirm knowledges otherwise disavowed, marginalized, exoticized, colonized— as is understanding the choir as preaching to us: hence my readings of art as religion and philosophy.

ASIDE: Some Examples. (1) When studying philosophy and critical theory began to remake my world, I tied my sentences up in convoluted knots trying to avoid certain constructions— mostly to avoid assigning agency and causality reductively. It took me a long time to get over this (*I know, I know*— but you should have seen my writing before). What happened in the longer term is that my grammar changed more thoroughly. The repercus-sions passed repeatedly through my thinking and I came to speak from a different place. This is groundwork.

(2) I come with certain advantages and disadvantages to the work of changing pronouns to refer to dear friends and family engaged in gender transitions. On one hand, I began my career as a theorist by working to deconstruct the crisp distinction between singularity and plurality (in favor of what I called *someness*), but on the other, using *they* as a singular pronoun is harder for me because I'm an English professor. If it were a matter of taking a person and moving them into a different category in your mind while leaving the system of categories intact, it would be relatively easy. On the other hand, if the entire system of categories has to be rearranged, that is the work of a lifetime— even if it is a work of love. Maybe it would break up the whole sex/gender system into micro-genders and constellational identities, or maybe it would settle into some provisionally stable plurality, or both. This is groundwork.

(3) A couple are at odds; each blames the other, and neither is likely to recognize that they themselves might be driving the polar-ization that is defining and trapping them— or that either of them, almost unilaterally, might be able to leverage and displace it. That's why they're stuck; that's what the stuckness is. To get out of the trap, the first step might be that (1) they have to own their own shit, but (2) they also have to recognize that their shit isn't their own. Just opening up the question of how the roles got written and assigned as they did is inevitably going to be a renegotiation of the roles. This is groundwork.

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✳ 4. Chapters ✳

As mentioned above, the chapters walk ecopoetics through the realms of language (Chapter 2), art (3), science (4), religion (5), and poetry (6), but the chapters aren't sequential and often the sections of the chapters— and even the paragraphs— aren't sequential either. This was not exactly intentional but arises from a method of contemplation that is more like turning around and around a complex object in your hand, which in turn arises from the predicament of using linear language in an overwhelmingly nonlinear world.

The second chapter, "Six Ways Language Distorts Our Thinking, and Eleven Ways to Push Back" is a kind of primer with an appendix on language mysticism. The chapter takes the reader through ways that language and language-based reasoning operate as constraints on thought, for example in their relentless linearity and simplistic designation of subjects and objects. These are some of the reasons that our unconscious minds, our bodies and the ecosystems to which we belong are so much smarter than we are. Of course language both hobbles and empowers, and constraints can be the basis of creativity (as is well known by poets, designers, soccer players, and thermodynamicists). As we are in the process of destroying the planet, the stakes are high.

Here again I follow Wittgenstein in understanding the job of philosophers as extricating themselves and others from the constraints of language, and "you can only succeed in extricating people who live in instinctive rebellion against language." One measure of this (which I take up in Chapter 3) is how difficult or impossible the enforced linearity of language makes it to talk about nonlinear causality and agency in evolution. The mission of ecopoetics is the *tikkun* (repair) of language. There, I said it.

The third chapter takes off from a consideration of Rome's famous Trevi fountain— and the story of how it came into being— as a demonstration of ecopoetic embodiment. The fountain makes a good philosophical *tableau vivant* because (1) it was the product of many hands, only some of which were human— as in a Ouija board message— and some were forces transverse to the individuals and groups involved, and (2) because it embodied this collaborational process in its constellation of humans, animals, human-animals, god-animals, god-humans, gods, angels. I understand this constellation as a realistic depiction of the ontological varieties of agency.

Q. Where did you get these ideas? A. *The fountain told me.* (If you had been there with me, you would have seen me standing there nodding, as one does when receiving whispered instructions, and as I often do in front of art that speaks to me.) Q. And how does the fountain know these things? A. Because of how it embodies the ways in which it came into being; which is to say, it speaks from experience. Q. So here you're using the metaphorical figure of speech known as personification? A. No, I mean this literally.

ASIDE:
Overlapping Beings.
As I was writing this, I came
across an article in *New Scientist* titled
"Stone tools or sculptures?" and subtitled
"Mysterious flint artifacts may be crude depic-
tions of humans." The only crude thing here is the
headline writer's understanding of art: do you think the
stone-age sculptors were trying for nineteenth-century
realism and just fell short? If so, you have no chance of
understanding what's going on with these artifacts. Try to
imagine instead what would happen if you did not anach-
ronistically import modernist analytical categories. What
if tools, art works, and humans are largely overlapping
kinds of beings engaged in the process of making
each other? If the use of tools and the making of
art made the users and makers human, maybe
you should try regarding the sculptures as
alive, think about what powers they have
and bestow. Talk to them, listen
to them.

"The Forest and the Trees" (Chapter 4) moves from city to woods to take on— this time in a more scientific register— the obstacles language puts in the way of understanding ecology— and to continue opening up the question of how agency and causality might be divided up among systems and entities and divinities— this time by considering the re-lationships of insects with plants and trees. In this act of leveraging, I call the two directions in which the conceptual crowbar moves *the Down Style* (the tendency to reduce entities into concatenations of abstract forces) and *the Up Style* (the tendency to entify, humanize and/or deify everything), via a consideration of common "mistakes" in assigning entity status in evolutionary discourse, while recognizing that ecosystems really do empower their components with sagacity.

Here my model is Mazatec *curandera* Maria Sabina's understanding of psilocybin mushrooms as "little ones" and "saint children."

The fifth and sixth chapters read two famous pieces of visionary writing as ecological wisdom. "Irony and Wildness in the book of Job" (Chapter 5) offers an extended reading of the book of Job— specifically God's speech at the end of the book. "Anarchy and Domination: An Ecosystematic Key to Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence'" (Chapter 6) attempts to unpack into declarative prose the cryptic and telegraphic couplets of Blake's "Auguries," one of his rewrites of the book of Job. I offer these readings as resources for teaching or studying these texts.

There are historical reasons why ecological logic would be the urgent subject of visionary knowledge in these two cases (that is, Job and the "Auguries"): each was written with reference to profound and planet-changing ecological shifts-in-process. When Job was written it was the shift to settled agricultural societies from nomadism, and Blake's world was in the throes of the shift to capitalist modernity and the Anthropocene. These terraforming events mean that the writers were describing the actual destruction and creation of the world— same reason why rereading and rewriting and retranslating them now can offer us vital conceptual resources.

※ 5. Beyond the Codex: A Metapoem ※

I've
long been fas-
cinated, led astray and
toward discoveries, by ques-
tions of scale: *to see a world in
a grain of sand.* How larger-scale
and smaller-scale patterns reso-
nate with each other is key to the
study of fractals and complex open
systems. How are psyches bound
up with social systems and vice
versa, personal with political,
organisms with ecosys-
tems, each a type of
the other?

For
a writ-
er, questions
of scale present an
ongoing practical challenge:
What should be a sentence, a para-
graph, a chapter? You could condense a
chapter into a sentence-sized nugget, but
whose mind is so open they could receive a
single sentence, out of the blue, as a light-
ning flash of transformative insight? I
know a therapist who thinks of such
an insight as *a penny dropped from
the top of the Empire State Build-
ing*: sometimes years of therapy
are dedicated to making and
finding this moment.

Texts can work to cultivate this openness. It is what the writer cultivates in the act of writing. This is what is meant by thinking: sitting in a room, say, under lockdown, day after day: you use your mind to open up the possibility of surprise, of engaging otherness. You're not alone. As if you're dreaming. You write things you couldn't have imagined, things you weren't smart enough to have thought up on your own. Poets used to say they took dictation from muses and angels. This is just another way of saying the same thing.

Perhaps the text plods along, page after page, and you read (or write) as if you were walking through the woods at night with a flashlight, only able to see the ground immediately in front of your feet, so that you might say, "I understood every word as I went along, and yet I could not tell you where I was or how I got there." Even so, along the way, you may bend down to watch some biological drama unfolding on a leaf— a moth in its first moments, slowly fanning its wings— or look up to see a hawk soaring silhouetted, black on black, against a moonless sky buzzing with the subtle light of Venus at its brightest phase— and maybe you turn off the flashlight and wait until your eyes acclimatize and the world opens up to you like a geode, and you begin again to walk with new vision, like an owl gliding silently through a strange, hand-colored, black-and-white night-blooming hyperreal landscape where you feel perfectly at home.

At its
best, the book, the
hardcopy codex, is a kind of
geode: the unprepossessing materiali-
ty of its exterior opens up into an intricate,
crystalline forest of language inside. Take this
excessive interiority a bit further and imagine one
of those elaborately carved boxwood rosary beads
from the Renaissance, a cathedral-like orb opening onto
another dimension, where a fractal thicket of detail fea-
tures panoramas in high relief and panels open to reveal
new scenes. From here it is only a step or two to the tele-
vision or the computer whose metal-and-glass skin opens
onto a quantum ghost world "with its frigid brilliances the
color of ice and fire and solitude"— or the brain or the
planet, their convoluted surfaces paisleyed with swirling
storms intermittently lit by branching constellations
of lightning while, sprawled out below them, frac-
tal webs of electric lights twinkle among dark
oceans where strange creatures, ultra-black
and bioluminescent, cruise the cold
and sunless depths.

Even no
so, matter how intri-
cate, the codex can only
be served up spatchcocked and
sliced. (The French call spatchcocked
chicken *crapaudine* because it looks
like a splayed toad; it is sold on
the street at markets where it is
cooked on a rotating medieval
torture device.) Beloved as it
is, is the codex so superior
that it should drive all al-
ternatives into obscurity?

It is no wonder, then, that the Web has evolved as a kind of anti-book. Instead of the rigidly linear numbered pages, every item is multiply tagged to be arranged and rearranged at will, just as Foucault described the way in which "certain aphasiacs," when confronted with something so simple as a group of differently colored balls of yarn, are unable to distribute them into definitive categories, instead "creating groups then disbursing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, beginning all over again"— except instead of being a pathology— or in addition to being one— this is how the internet is designed: as an automat where everything is perpetually pulverized to be repackaged and resold.

My love and trouble with books come from my love and trouble with language. I understand that language is fundamentally linear but this doesn't mean the linearity has to fully constrain narrative and argumentative form. I'm inclined to understand ideas as constellational, argument as a process of prying back and forth with a crowbar, coming at something from a couple of angles like the two keys that open a safe deposit box, (as I have said) turning something around in your mind, repetition and variation, finding the right metaphor that organizes ideas into its orbit— and as is obvious, I have basic problems with how long sentences should be (I can't

help thinking that every sentence should have at least three ideas— *what juggler ever made an act out of juggling one or two things?—* and contain parenthetical detours)— and as to paragraphing— I must have missed class that day. How could a book be designed to embody these alternate principles, physically as well as operationally? Since this particular incarnation of this book is a codex, I only gesture at this question (such as via the asides, the shaped text, the multi-ple relationships between poetry and prose, the non-sequentiality of the chapters), but I want-ed to put it upfront to do my ritual best, my metaphorical best, even with these con-straints, to invite you to open up your engagement with this book.

S t a r t
with the idea of a geode
or of the intricately carved rosary bead,
and imagine that it is also a constellation, a
cat's cradle, and even if the text is arranged in a
largely linear sequence, there are multiple pathways
of contact among each point, like a universe in which
wormholes can connect points, almost instantaneously,
otherwise light-years distant— a universe in which
simultaneity and adjacency are relative— that
is, our universe— an opal being turned
around in your hand.

CHAPTER TWO
Six Ways Language Distorts
Our Thinking, and Eleven
Ways to Push Back