

Otherwise than Colonial, or Beyond Possession:
Towards a Jewish and Decolonial Relationship with Land

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Environmental Philosophy Civic Engagement Project

In the last instance, however, we will forever remain tone deaf to wisdom in its place if we do not commit ourselves to the study of indigenous languages in those places.

—Sol Neely, *“On Becoming Human in Lingít Aani’”*

Unlike the stories in the bible or any other sacred text that serves as the basis for any historic religion now present in America, these tribal stories were not imported; they were not brought here from somewhere else. They were given to people right here and they are intertwined with and directly tied to this particular landscape.

—Heather Cahoon, *“Heather Cahoon reads and discusses Baby Out of Cut-Open Woman”*

The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other, for whom and before whom I am responsible, of this very giving of signs, that is, of this responsibility: “here I am.”

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*

I. Prologue

When I reflect upon the origins of inspiration for this project, I immediately recognize that the earliest motivations began to form when I read Sol Neely’s essay, “On Becoming Human in *Lingít Aani’*,” during the summer of 2021. I met Sol when I presented a paper at the North American Levinas Society—an academic gathering Sol helped begin when he was a graduate student himself—on Emmanuel Levinas and environmental ethics, with Sol in the (virtual) audience. The final section of my paper was an attempt to engage Levinas in conversation with

Indigenous thinkers. I opened with a discussion of environmental themes in Leslie Silko's novel, *Ceremony*. Just as I finished the section on Silko, I turned to Sol's paper, "Becoming Human in *Lingit Aani*." And, at the exact same moment I referenced Sol in my paper—I came to find out later—Sol messaged the session facilitator if he might respond to me. It was all quite a serendipitous experience for me.

Sol and I connected after the conference and remained in touch through that fall, when, along with Jim Hatley and Rabbi Laurie Franklin, we began an intimate study of Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic readings. This group lasted from the fall of 2021 until the summer of 2022, when Sol, Jim, and I planned to present at a conference in Alberta, Canada, to develop some of the ideas we had each been working through in our reading group. By the time fall 2022 had come around and I'd settled back in Missoula for the school year, I drafted an email to send to the reading group, but for some reason I never hit send. I drafted the email on October 17, 2022. On October 18, 2022, I received a text message from Jim Hatley that Sol had passed away.

Sol Neely died on October 16, 2022. I dedicate this CEP to Sol.

Sol is the inspiration for this project in multiple senses. Reading Sol's essays provided me with certain concepts and approaches with which to think about Jewish philosophy, environmental philosophy, and decolonization. To name a few things that Sol taught me: that the world is always already storied, that those stories are the stories of oral literary traditions, and that we must learn the Indigenous languages of particular places to learn those stories; ways in which to view my own traditions: Sol opened me up to Hebraic oral traditions—the Oral Torah; the connections between inspiration, respiration, and revelation; and that we must be committed to decolonization even before we learn what it means. But Sol is also the inspiration for this project because, since his death, I have felt called to attend ever more earnestly to the concerns

that he faithfully and consistently addressed—decolonization, especially, and Indigenous language revitalization in particular (among, of course, a host of social justice issues). Sol is the inspiration for this project just as I hope this project to be a testament to his legacy.

And beyond Sol’s erudition, his was a spirit of immense hospitality (he literally invited me into his home—though I was unfortunately unable to ever make this visit) and warmth, which you could feel from just his smile alone. The excitement in his gestures, voice, and face when we’d get into some meaningful philosophical discussion—along with the peaceful green light emanating from his office contained in his Zoom screen—is embedded in my memory *ad infinitum*.

Sol, I regret that I never had the opportunity to shake your hand. The world is less for your absence.

I say as much to myself as to Sol’s family as to the very earth that holds his body:

הַמָּקוֹם יִנַּחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.¹

And yet, as Sol reminds us, every inhale constitutes gratitude. With my exhale I simultaneously mourn the loss and bless the memory of Sol Neely.

ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם שחלק מחכמתו לבשר ודם.²

Finally, I want to make a note about the poem interludes throughout this portfolio.

Heather Cahoon’s poetry in her book, *Horsefly Dress*, has deeply informed my thinking about story, land, and the relation between them. Since I don’t analyze her poetry in any part of this CEP portfolio, I’ve selected four poems to include throughout and which have been significant for me in formulating this project. I frame the poems as inhabiting four levels of my CEP as I’ve aligned each of the four poems with the four levels of traditional rabbinic interpretation, which

¹ “May the Place comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

² “Blessed are you, Creator, sovereign of the world, who has given wisdom to flesh and blood.”

consists of פְּשׁוּט (the literal), רְמִז (the symbolic or contextual), דְּרִישׁ (the moral or ethical), and סוּד (the mystical or secret). I imagine the poetry itself as providing a kind of commentary on my writing.

II. Introduction

In this Civic Engagement Project (CEP), I aim to conceive of and enact a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land in the particularities of Níʔaycčstm (the Missoula area). This CEP consists of three related projects to accomplish this goal: First, a book study group to engage with distinctly Jewish approaches to human and land relationships; Second, a Tu BiShvat celebration, which is a Jewish holiday that celebrates the new year for trees and “represents both an ancient tax delineation and a moment of new beginning”³; And, third, contributing to a native plant garden in Níʔaycčstm that centers Indigenous (in particular, Séliš-Qlispé) language and cultural revitalization and land back. This third project will involve a planting day event with educational components led by Indigenous language and cultural educators, Aspen and Cameron Decker of Xwíxwílt “Alive and Well” Séliš Education Integration.⁴

In what follows I detail my motivation for pursuing these three projects. My academic passion lies at the intersection of Jewish philosophy, environmental studies, and decolonial thought and practice. This CEP blends each of these topics and concerns in order to provide a way for the communities I am involved with in Níʔaycčstm to meaningfully engage with them. The book study group provides a context to engage deeply with Jewish understandings of land. Importantly, this part of the project offers a way to connect with the Jewish communities of Montana to struggle together to understand what it means to be both Jewish and concerned for *tikkun olam* (mending the earth).

This book study group is in collaboration with my friend, colleague, and mentor Dr. James Hatley—with whom I co-facilitated this book study group—and Har Shalom (Missoula’s synagogue). The Tu BiShvat celebration, led by Rabbi Emerita during one of the reading group

³ Jewish Farmer Network “Shvat/February Newsletter.”

⁴ See more about their work on their website: <https://xwíxwílt.com/>.

sessions, flows out of this book study group. It is an established Jewish holiday—and an especially ecologically themed one.

And, finally, the native plant garden project is my attempt at using this project to make a lasting, physical influence on the place in which I conduct this CEP. This part of the project aims to not only raise awareness of environmental issues, but also to tangibly contribute to solutions through the practice of restoration ecology. It is place-specific as this sort of project depends on becoming aware of what kinds of species live in this place now and which have historically lived here. It would prompt the question of: What is a healthy ecosystem, here in this place? And, central to this entire CEP and this part of it in particular, I emphasize the Indigenous language(s) and lifeways that have arisen from this land by installing signs with these plants' original names and other ethnobotanical information. This planting project centers the historical fact of colonization as the throughline of violence against this land and the Séliš-Q̓lispé people—as well as other Indigenous peoples who have called this place home or traveled in its vicinity. The healing of this land is crucially linked to decolonization. For this latter reason, the native plant garden is also an effort to contribute to the land back movement by making the plot of land the garden rests upon accessible for tribal peoples to harvest and gather foods in their traditional ways.⁵

In other words, this CEP aims to conceive of and enact a relationship with land otherwise than the colonial, or beyond possession.⁶

⁵ Check out this website for more context of land back: <https://landback.org/>.

⁶ This is a play on one of Emmanuel Levinas's books, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Emmanuel Levinas has been a great inspiration in my academic and practical life.

III. Background Context and Plan

Jewish people have always been deeply concerned about land. Of course, this concern has taken many various forms throughout the generations. At the heart of the tradition of the Jewish people, though, is an understanding that we are dependent upon the health of the land and the health of the land, in turn, is in some significant sense dependent upon how we respond to the land. Scholar Ellen F. Davis writes this:

Overall, from a biblical perspective, the sustained fertility and habitability of the earth, or more particularly of the land of Israel, is the best index of the health of the [Israelites' relationship with the Divine]. When humanity, or the people Israel, is disobedient, thorns and briars abound (Gen. 3:17–19); rain is withheld (Deut. 11:11–17; 28:24); the land languishes and mourns (Isa. 16:8; 33:9; Hos. 4:3). Conversely, the most extravagant poetic images of loveliness—in the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Song of Songs—all show a land lush with growth, together with a people living in (or restored to) righteousness and full intimacy with God.⁷

From the outset, I want to be clear that the land I am talking about is the land in which I dwell as a descendent of diasporic Jews: what is now called Missoula, Montana or the aboriginal territory of the Séliš-Qliske people (among other first peoples who traversed this land) who call this land Nłʔaycəstm. Land is not land in the abstract, but always *this land*. In some ways, this entire project can be reduced to these two questions: What can anything written or said about a land thousands of miles away, in an entirely different time period have anything to do with *this land*? And, how could one possibly learn to live in a land in which they are totally foreign, in which they are but a stranger and a sojourner?

To be more precise, what can Jewish traditions teach us about living in the Rocky Mountains in the 20th century? There may be two responses. First, in standard rabbinic formula, I answer with another question: How can one learn to live *here* when all we have is knowledge of how to live *there* (that is, knowledge of how to live in the context of the original lands and

⁷ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, Agriculture*, 8.

times in which that knowledge was generated)? Are there place-based, universal values and practices? Certainly the particularities of one's land suggest how to live well there and those lessons are unlikely to translate to other places. A second response, however, might be more practical. There have sprung into existence over the last several decades several impressive and influential Jewish environmental thinkers and organizations. To list a few authors and some of their works in no particular order: Rabbi David Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*; Rabbi Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of our Joy*; Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, *The Splendor of Creation*; Rabbi Natan Margalit, *The Pearl and the Flame*. Each of these authors, among countless others not on this list, attempts to illuminate the deep environmental wisdom in the texts and traditions of the Jewish people. To list a few organizations, also in no particular order: Hazon, ADAMAH, the Jewish Farmer Network, JOFEE (Jewish Outdoor, Food, Farming & Environmental Education), Linke Fligl. Each of these programs, projects, or organizations has—whether directly or indirectly—made possible the sort of project I aim to accomplish here. I consider this CEP to be an addition (only the most miniscule addition, however) to the incredible work that all of these folks have been doing to enact a distinctly Jewish and (what I consider to be) decolonial relationship with land.

One of these organizations has been a particularly large influence on this CEP, the Jewish Farmer Network (JFN) which is an organization that functions quite literally to connect Jewish farmers. Especially their “Jews & Land Study Group,” which is an “online gathering to explore a people's-level history of Jews in relationship to land—from the creation myths of the Torah to the times of sovereignty in ancient Israel, from the diasporas to immigrant farmers in the US” and “whose goal is to aid... in understanding contemporary Jewish American life through a shared examination of our relationship as Jews to land throughout our history.”⁸ I have

⁸ Jewish Farmer Network, <https://www.jewishfarmernetwork.org/jews-land>.

participated in this group twice over the last few years. Each time was deeply significant for my own journey in learning about my Jewish heritage in relation with land. What established the experience in my memory is the fact that this was a collective experience: learning and sharing was done in community where I could hear others' experiences and varying relationships to Jewish identity and place, significantly as Jewish folk living in diaspora—and most of us currently farmers or farmers adjacent. That is, everyone was living in some dynamic relationship with the land they inhabit. This, then, is the deep influence of JFN's work for my CEP: the collective exploration of Jewish relations with land through an interrogation of Jewish history and texts.

My experience with the Jews & Land Study Group certainly inspired my desire to initiate a textual study of Jewish environmental thought. I started planning for the reading group section of this project last September when my friend, colleague, and mentor Dr. James Hatley suggested the possibility of forming a book study through the Niḡaycčstm/Missoula synagogue. We dreamed and planned together and decided to co-facilitate a weekly study of Rabbi Ellen Bernstein's meditation on one of the biblical stories of creation, AKA her book, *The Splendor of Creation*. We got the backing of Har Shalom and support from other Jewish congregations in Montana and even Rabbi Ellen Bernstein herself, who offered to lead the final session. We decided to conduct the book study over Zoom on Monday nights and it just so happened that Tu BiShvat 5783 (in Jewish reckoning) fell on a Monday.⁹ Rabbi Emerita Laurie Franklin generously led the book study participants in a contemplative, profound, and fragrant celebration of the Tu BiShvat holiday on February 6th.

⁹ Well, it ended on a Monday. In a Hebraic accounting, days begin at sundown and end at the next sundown. So, in the Gregorian calendar, Tu BiShvat begins at sundown, January 5th, and ends at sundown, January 6th.

Jews have farmed for as long as I know and I think Jewish traditions have wisdom to share even about gardening. But what about native plant gardening? What about creating a native plant garden to promote Indigenous, specifically Séliš-Qłispé, language and cultural revitalization? Can Jewish traditions teach us anything about this? I believe so, but that may take a much more winding path than I hope to at this point. This is related to, if not the same as, the second of the first set of questions I asked.

The seeds of the native plant garden project in Nl̓ʔayc̓c̓stm began to take shape during the summer of 2022, between my first and second years in the UM Environmental Philosophy MA program. For the duration of this summer, I worked on a farm in the traditional homelands of the spuyaləpabš people, the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, in what is also called Tacoma, Washington. While working on this farm, Hannah Sattler, my supervisor, gave me space to explore some farm-related creative projects connected to my pursuits in environmental philosophy. I was able to accomplish two projects that summer: designate a Shmita plot on the farm (although we did plant peas, oats, and red clover as cover crops)¹⁰ and start a native plant garden that centered tx̣wəlšucid, the language of the spuyaləpabš people, through signs of the original names in tx̣wəlšucid of each of the native plants that were in the garden. With help from the fellow farmers and, especially, a friend and farm volunteer Lucas Dambergs, plus the support of my supervisor Hannah and in collaboration with the Puyallup Language Program,¹¹ the foundation was laid for what would evolve to be my contributions to the native plant garden at the PEAS Farm.

There are many others to learn from about native plant gardening beyond Jewish traditions and there are especially exemplary gardens that already exist in Nl̓ʔayc̓c̓stm. There are

¹⁰ Shmita refers to a set of agricultural laws for the seventh year in the Hebrew annual cycle. One of the most distinctive laws of Shmita is to let the land rest from cultivation for the entire year. See here for more information: <https://shmitaproject.org/>.

¹¹ See here for more information about the Puyallup Language Program: <https://www.puyalluptriballanguage.org/index.php>.

several native plant gardens on the University of Montana campus, including one that consists of plants across the campus which are labeled with their scientific names, their English names, and sometimes their original names¹² and where they are native to (because they aren't always native to Níʔaycčstm, but all plants are native somewhere). A second native plant garden on the UM campus is called the “Ethnobotany Garden” and it is placed around the Payne Family Native American Center. It consists of eight stone enclosures with small gardens within that “represent diverse ecoregions of Montana and the Native American Tribes that live within them.”¹³ The Ethnobotany Garden is particularly instructive for my native plant garden endeavors because it is an example of how a garden might be employed as a space for decolonization and education, specifically in recognizing the history and presence of Indigenous peoples and their relationships with their lands. Additionally, for their undergraduate capstone project in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana, Gina Raicovich established a native plant and pollinator garden at the Program in Ecological Agriculture and Society (PEAS) Farm between 2009 and 2012. Raicovich’s aim for the PEAS Farm garden was to “create something that would address a conservation issue [restoration of native habitat and native species], as well as enhance the agroecological goals of the farm.”¹⁴

When considering the possibility of a project like a native plant garden in Níʔaycčstm like the one I worked on in spuyaləpabš land, I decided that, before anything else, I needed to find Indigenous educators to collaborate with. This project would fail if it did not promote Indigenous sovereignty. So, I reached out to a name that kept popping up around Níʔaycčstm/Missoula: Aspen Decker. She is a fluent speaker of Nsélišcn, what I have also been

¹² These are the names the first peoples have for these plants. Their first names, the names the plants revealed to the first peoples.

¹³ See <https://www.umt.edu/native-garden/>

¹⁴ Raicovich, “Conservation on Working Lands.”

calling Séliš language. She is an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), has an MA in linguistics from UM, and has taught Nsélišcn for over a decade. Her husband is Cameron Decker who is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation, has an MA in Fine Arts, is a wonderful artist himself, and an incredibly creative art educator. They have started an Indigenous place-based educational business called X^wlx^wilt LLC “Alive and Well” Séliš Education Integration. I began correspondence with Aspen and Cameron in October, 2022. They graciously offered to collaborate with me on this project.

Working with X^wlx^wilt, however, is dependent on my ability to fairly compensating them for their work. There is a long legacy of exploitation and appropriation of Indigenous peoples’ labor and culture by settler folk. I want to do this project right—respectfully, humbly, and in a way that actually benefits Indigenous peoples. So, I applied for the University of Montana’s Experiential Learning Scholarship Fund with the hopes of receiving \$2,000 of funding to work with X^wlx^wilt.

Where to host the native plant garden and event? I made a list of places where I might do this and I didn’t have to look further than the first name on my list: the PEAS Farm. Maggie Gammons, who was working at the PEAS Farm at the time, made nine ethnobotany signs for plants native to Níʔaycčstm. Maggie informed me that the PEAS Farm was already planning on installing these signs into the already established PEAS Farm native plant garden in spring, 2023, but the garden needed some care: the path was worn down and unclear; there weren’t many food or medicinal plants, especially ones that are important for the Séliš-Qlispé people; and the garden just generally could be more accessible and available to the community. So, in conversation with Maggie, Caroline Stephens (PEAS Farm Lecturer), and Dave Victor (PEAS Farm Director) my plan to contribute to a native plant garden consisted of the following four things, all of which

center Séliš-Qlispé relationships with the land and accessibility for Indigenous folks, especially for traditional ways of gathering plants:

1. Install Maggie's ethnobotany signs and other relevant historical and cultural interpretive signage that emphasizes Séliš-Qlispé relationship with the land the garden inhabits
2. Remake a clearly defined walking path
3. Add more food and medicinal plants, specifically plants significant to Séliš-Qlispé peoples which would be available for gathering
4. Organize an event in the garden led by Aspen and Cameron Decker

How does one transition from history, to philosophy, to story, to event planning? How does one conclude a reflection made up of each of these? I struggled to write this short section of my CEP, yet most of the words came readily from my body to the page once I sat down to do it. Seams hold us together, but the seams of transition aren't easily hidden. Maybe fragmentation is a key mark of diaspora. My soul is fragmented just as the land I inhabit is fragmented. I hope this project heals the fragmentation of my self as much as the fragmentation of this land—but who is to say these aren't already connected by the seams of time and coincidence?

“Baby out of Cut-Open Woman”¹⁵ :פּוֹשֵׁט

so-called because he was sck^wel’elénč, “cut out of the stomach”
as an infant. Indeed, he survived the un/believable, a lucky break,
to become the only living member of his immediate family.

Another lucky break, he won his race against the cold birds,
earning the right
to make a law that they could no longer control all the weather,
ending the age of ice.

Next, he gathered his families’ bones
their marrowed limbs, each rib, forearm
and finger.

Covering them with his blanket, he jumped over
four times,

bringing them,
each one
back
to life.

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These are the stories that belong here,
that pushed up through this soil unfurling
as arrow-leaved balsamroot leaves and boulders found in unusual
places.

How else does a thing enter this world
now so changed we struggle to hear the shapes of a language
that no longer fits every ear.

Each story word frag
ment moves
over hills the highest reaches of trees
without catching in memory. But

the crispness of Snlaqéy of K^wÍncutn like fire
crackle the flick of sound a body remembers.

¹⁵ I adapted this version of this poem from Joy Harjo’s digital story map of Native poets across the US in her project, “Living Nations, Living Words,” which features Heather Cahoon and this specific poem. You can find more information and a copy of this poem available at <https://www.loc.gov/item/2020785216/>.

IV. First Theoretical Applications: Issues in the Anthropocene

For the next three sections, I attempt to connect three of the core graduate philosophy seminars required for the MA in Environmental Philosophy to my specific CEP. This is the most explicitly theoretical dimension of the CEP. I begin with PHL 505, “Issues in the Anthropocene.”

We live in a moment in time when every inch of the earth’s surface is shaped entirely by human action. In “Issues in the Anthropocene,” taught by Dr. Christopher Preston, we scrutinized every inch of this statement, so that no matter pertaining to the end of nature went untouched. That is, we explored what “the Anthropocene” is and what it might mean for environmental philosophy.

The End of Nature Naturally

We began the course with Bill McKibben’s declaration of “the end of nature” in 1989 and the parallel declaration from the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) in 2016. They both argue that “nature” has ended. Moreover, they both argue from empirical reasons. I first detail McKibben’s argument, then the ICS’s.

McKibben defines nature as that which is “substantially unaltered by man.”¹⁶ Thus, nature exists as long as one could “imagine that somewhere a place [exists] free of its taint.”¹⁷ The “it” McKibben is referring to here is DDT and he has in mind how Rachel Carson was able to locate places on earth that were yet uninhibited by it. This is just one instance of the alteration of places by man, which McKibben connects with the ending of nature. If it has been substantially altered by man, it is not nature; if it has not been substantially altered by man, it is nature. The point is, even in the 1960s when Rachel Carson was describing something as pervasive as DDT and acid rain, there were still unaffected places—there was still nature. And as

¹⁶ McKibben, 55.

¹⁷ McKibben, 56.

long as we can believe that there is, somewhere out there, a place untouched by human interference, nature exists.

But this belief in nature is no longer possible because the “idea of nature will not survive the new global pollution—the carbon dioxide and the CFCs and the like.”¹⁸ Climate change is different from past human interference with the planet in its pervasiveness as well as its quality:

We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.¹⁹

Nature, as defined by McKibben, is completely independent of human activity. Anthropogenic climate change means that every part of the planet is affected by human activity. There is nowhere left unaffected by our burning of fossil fuels. This means humans have altered the weather; but climate also determines much more than weather patterns, McKibben points out. So, for McKibben, anthropogenic climate change means that there is no place left on earth that is independent of human activity. There is no more nature: “there is nothing but us.”

The ICS similarly argues for the end of nature. They list reasons in addition to climate change that suggest the end of a nature independent from human activity. The ICS sets for their task to answer two geological questions:

Have humans changed the Earth system to such an extent that recent and currently forming geological deposits include a signature that is distinct from those of the Holocene and earlier epochs, which will remain in the geological record? If so, when did this stratigraphic signal (not necessarily the first detectable anthropogenic change) become recognizable worldwide?²⁰

The first question is to determine a human stratigraphic signature, that is, some trace of human activity in the earth's strata that makes it substantially different from other geologic layers. The second question is about what geologists call a “Golden Spike”—when exactly did this signature

¹⁸ McKibben, 58.

¹⁹ McKibben, 58.

²⁰ Waters, et al., 1.

come about? These questions are necessary to determine a new geological epoch completely altered by human activity.

The ICS locates three human “drivers” that, together, produce the human signatures of a distinct geological epoch which they term the Anthropocene. Those three drivers are “accelerated technological development, rapid growth of the human population, and increased consumption of resources.”²¹ The seven signatures the ICS discusses are the following: (1) “New anthropogenic materials”; (2) “Modification of sedimentary processes”; (3) “Changed geochemical signatures in recent sediment and ice”; (4) “Radiogenic signatures and radionuclides in sediments and ice”; (5) “Carbon cycle evidence from ice cores”; (6) “Climate change and rates of sea-level change since the end of the last ice age”; and (7) “Biotic change.”²² For the ICS, these signatures support the “formalization of the Anthropocene as a stratigraphic entity.”²³ Though they do say that the evidence they have put forward suggests a start date somewhere in the mid-20th century, it is important to note that the ICS has not yet decided on a Golden Spike.²⁴ However, the anthropogenic signatures, they argue, are evidence of a planet entirely shaped by human activity. Though they never state it this way, if nature is whatever is independent of human activity, there would be no such thing as nature in—and after—the Anthropocene.

The End of Nature Conceptually

If McKibben and the ICS argue for the end of nature empirically, then there are two other ways of arguing for the end of nature. One is a *conceptual* argument for the end of nature and the other

²¹ Waters, et al., 2.

²² See Waters, et al., 3-7, for a detailed explanation of what each of these signatures mean.

²³ Waters, et al., 8.

²⁴ Waters, et al., 8.

is, for lack of a better term, a *social* argument for the end of nature. In fact, these are not so much arguments for the end of nature as for the fact that “nature” never existed in the first place.

In his book, *Thinking like a Mall*, philosopher Steven Vogel is on board with McKibben with regards to the end of nature—but for entirely different reasons. Instead of arguing that at some recent (or not so recent) moment humans have altered the planet so much so that there is no longer something we could point to as being independent from human activity, Vogel argues that the idea of nature itself is so conceptually flawed that it should be abandoned altogether. To start, he believes the term is too ambiguous, “so slippery that all attempts to pin it down seem equally doomed to fail.”²⁵ He offers an attempt at a conceptual definition of “nature,” but, in the final analysis, determines it to be too flawed a concept to maintain. In what follows I describe how Vogel arrives at this conclusion.

Vogel begins with McKibben’s definition of nature as that which is independent from human activity. What is at stake in the end of nature, for McKibben, is not the empirical consequences of this ending, but the loss of naturalness itself. But Vogel finds this problematic. For, are not humans themselves natural? That is, do humans not arise out of the same processes as the rest of life on the planet? If humans are natural, then it would make no sense to say that human activity could ever end nature. If, on the other hand, you stick to the claim that humans are not natural, then this would contradict the pervasive environmentalist message to “live in accordance with nature,” in addition to its incongruence with Darwinian evolutionary theory. Thus, the concept of nature defined as “independence from human action” seems to encounter a brutal dilemma.

However, Vogel employs John Stuart Mill’s two possible definitions of “nature” in order to find a way out of this dilemma. Vogel observes that the term nature is not contradictory, but

²⁵ Vogel, 9.

that these two definitions of nature are here being used equivocally. On the one hand nature means that which is independent from human activity and, on the other hand, it means all of the physical world—of which humans are a part. However, this distinction faces problems as well. It is impossible to say that Nature (as including all of the physical world) could be ended by human activity, for human activity is Natural in the sense that it is part of the physical world. It is possible, however, to say that human activity ends nature (as that which is independent from human activity)—but that is merely true by definition: if nature is whatever is independent from human activity, any human activity on something independent from humans would end its being natural (independent from human activity).²⁶ The problem here is that environmentalists want to say something normative about the end of nature, that ending nature is bad. Thus, there must be something of value that we could point to as being lost through the ending of nature. It cannot be Nature, for that is impossible; and it cannot be nature, for that would beg the question.

Vogel then considers other possible definitions of nature besides the two that he borrowed from Mill. These definitions have to do with a natural/artificial distinction and try to explain this distinction in terms of biology or intent.²⁷ I won't describe these definitions in any more detail here, but I will say that Vogel thinks that even these other definitions run up against similar problems that the first two definitions encountered, precisely because of the (anthropocentric) dualism of each of these definitions of "nature." For Vogel, these problems suggest that the

distinction between humans and nature... that seems crucial to McKibben's concern about nature's end, and that more broadly seems central to the environmentalist desire to protect nature from destruction at the hands of human beings, depends on a philosophically and biologically untenable dualism that forgets human beings themselves are part of nature and instead treats them as exceptional creatures who somehow transcend the natural.²⁸

²⁶ Vogel uses a capitalized "Nature" to denote the conception of Nature that includes all of the physical world and a lowercase "nature" to denote the conception of nature that is independent from human activity.

²⁷ See Vogel, 16-24, for this discussion.

²⁸ Vogel, 24.

Therefore, says Vogel, using the term nature is too conceptually flawed and must be abandoned.

If Vogel is correct, this would necessitate a new kind of environmentalism. Previously, environmentalism has emphasized the conservation and preservation of land by restricting it from human development. But this environmentalism depends on the concept of nature as something separate from human activity. If this concept has no substance to it, then all of environmental conservation and preservation must be entirely overhauled and rethought in terms of how human activity is entangled and not separate from the environment. For Vogel, this means that we should stop thinking about “nature” and take responsibility for the environment that we, as humans, always already construct.

Decolonization as Translation

This leads to the social argument for the end of nature: since time immemorial—a time that, while human memory may fail to access, the land itself remembers full well—Indigenous peoples have always inhabited and shaped the lands that settler peoples have wrongfully believed to be apart from human influence and termed “nature” or “wilderness.” On this point we learned from Robin Kimmerer.

Kimmerer opens her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by telling the story of Skywoman, which is a creation story “shared by the original peoples of the Great Lakes.”²⁹ In this creation story, a woman falls from Skyworld down into a world of water. In the water were many animals. The woman eventually comes to rest on the back of a turtle, while animals dive downward to find mud to create land for Skywoman. After many attempts and failures, a muskrat gives it a go. But the muskrat floats up to the surface, dead. However, the muskrat had been able to find some mud. Skywoman spreads the mud on the turtle’s back while giving thanks to the animals. This mud spread on the turtle’s back creates land for Skywoman and her offspring—what many first

²⁹ Kimmerer, 7.

peoples continue to refer to as Turtle Island. Skywoman also plants seeds that grow into the flora of Turtle Island, which attracts animals to live on Turtle Island with Skywoman. In Kimmerer's reading of this story, what is essential to the creation of land for Skywoman (and humans altogether) is the hospitality and aid of the animals coupled with Skywoman's show of gratitude.

Kimmerer contrasts this story with the Biblical story of Eve. In the story from the Bible, the first woman eats from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, even after her creator had commanded her not to. As a result, she and her husband are exiled from Eden, a beautiful paradise garden. The humans are forced out into a difficult world where they are in strained relationships with land (they must now labor for sustenance), their creator, and even animals (the snake who tempted Eve to eat of the tree is cursed and in struggle against humans).³⁰ While there are interesting similarities to notice, particularly the fact that both lead characters in these stories are portrayed as female, the differences are what are really important for Kimmerer: "One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be the home of the descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven."³¹ In the story of Skywoman, humans are in a relationship of reciprocity with land and animals. In the story of Eve, humans are in a broken relationship with land and animals.

And these differences in stories are important because, Kimmerer writes, "[l]ike Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our

³⁰ Of course, this is all told without reference to the Hebrew text or midrash (interpretation) that is necessary for any such telling. One thing I would like to point out is that this Hebraic story suggests that exile is the state of humanity after *Eden*. This story was likely written down when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon (and the descendants of those people remain a diasporic people). The experience of exile and suffering is woven into the history and story of Jewish people and, therefore, it makes sense that it is a key feature of their creation story.

³¹ Kimmerer, 7.

consciousness.”³² From this point, it is easy to see that our environmental problems are, at least in part, due to the stories that we tell about our relationship to our environment. We are facing global environmental issues not simply because of something wrong with the land itself (for instance its scarcity), but because of something that is wrong with our relationship to the land. And our relationship to the land is a product of the stories we tell about that relationship. Says Kimmerer: “Look at the legacy of poor Eve’s exile from Eden: the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It’s not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land.”³³ Kimmerer’s suggestion, then, is what she refers to as “re-story-ation.” Restoration, the healing of a broken world, must also include a process of learning stories that shape our consciousness in a way that fosters a healthy (however you define it) relationship between humans and land.

But it isn’t just any stories that we should learn. Kimmerer writes that “our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories.”³⁴ What stories must we hear? The land’s stories. The stories of particular places. The stories that arose from human interaction with particular landscapes. If you live in Missoula, Montana, you need to learn the stories that arose out of that land. What are those stories? This becomes somewhat of a tricky question with multiple layers to it. First, we could think of it in terms of history. What is the history of this land? Learning a landscape’s stories, then, would look like an exercise in natural history. But there’s more to it than that. Humans have interacted with their landscapes, actively shaping the land and their relationship to it, for millennia. So we can’t separate the “natural history” of a landscape from

³² Kimmer, 7.

³³ Kimmerer, 9.

³⁴ Kimmerer, 9.

the stories of Indigenous peoples who live or have lived within that landscape.³⁵ Second, then, we might think of the stories we ought to learn as the stories of Indigenous peoples.

But how could settler folk—the perpetrators or beneficiaries of colonial violence—ever learn the Indigenous stories of particular places? If a settler decided they wanted to learn the stories of a place, would that be another manifestation of a colonial project that reinscribes “coloniality at the level of signification”?³⁶ According to Sol Neely, learning the Indigenous stories of particular places, what he calls “encountering wisdom in its place,” requires “a kind of translation of experience as the modality of decolonial justice.”³⁷ But translation has its limits. First, translation risks what Neely calls “transmuting,” where “economies of signification... smuggle within them economies of abjection,” or where attempts at constructing meaning—as literal linguistic meaning or metaphorically existential meaning—nevertheless are a means of exclusion and violence.³⁸ Translating languages, stories, or experiences is never a one to one ratio and is riddled with interpretive gaps and spaces that leave room for harboring “coloniality at the level of signification.” We must be attentive to the violent colonial strategies like boarding schools that constitute the reasons why many Indigenous languages are fragmented in the first place and which manifest today through trauma even in the use of Indigenous languages.³⁹ And

³⁵ Of course, as a result of settler colonialism in places like the United States, many Indigenous peoples have been dispossessed of their homes and no longer reside in their ancestral homelands. It is important to recognize these groups’ rights to their homelands, the wrongs of their displacement, as well as their continued existence today.

³⁶ Neely, 2. Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes coloniality as “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (quoted in Neely, 4).

³⁷ Neely, 5.

³⁸ Neely, 7.

³⁹ On page 9 Neely writes directly about boarding schools: “Here, we can look to the extensive use of boarding schools in Indian Country and *Lingít Aani* as an example. In terms of colonialism, Native children were forced to leave their homes, villages, and culture to attend boarding school where they were physically and mentally abused for using their language. The common dictum that gave moral justification to these colonial institutions of genocide was, “Kill the Indian. Save the Child.” The use of boarding schools is clearly an instance of colonialism, but the more subtle and persistent expressions of coloniality—as a cultural disturbance that affects our very relation to the letter of language—are less explicit. X’nei Lance Twitchell, a professor of Tlingít language and culture at the University of Alaska Southeast, regularly notes in conversation that, in these boarding schools, “they beat our language out of us and replaced it with a language that hates us.” It is remarkable to describe English as a language “that hates us.” These are, indeed, heavy words. They testify to that quality of transmuting that subtly

second, the limits of translation means that at some point it is necessary to learn and to promote the revitalization of the Indigenous languages that the stories of places were originally told in. Neely argues this when he writes, “we will forever remain tone deaf to wisdom in its place if we do not commit ourselves to the study of indigenous languages in those places.”⁴⁰ And, third, we must be wary of essentialism. Essentialism would suggest that there is some “cultural or linguistic purity or fixity” of indigeneity that does not or cannot change.⁴¹ This is problematic as it is connected with colonial definitions of indigeneity aimed at extermination and genocide; it is also problematic as it is connected with questions of representation and “authenticity.”

Here is where I connect “Issues in the Anthropocene” to my CEP. We live in a moment in time when every inch of the earth’s surface is shaped entirely by human action—and the concerning majority of that action is a reflection of colonial violence against the earth by mainly wealthy and dominant nations. My hope for this CEP is to meaningfully engage the question of how to acknowledge and respond to the history, legacy, and ongoing violence against the land and the people of the land in which I live. The Jewish environmental study group engages the Anthropocene by making accessible and renewing environmental wisdom embedded in Jewish traditions. This is wisdom that tells of the deep connections between humans and the lands they inhabit, not a nature apart from humans.⁴² Moreover, engaging this wisdom is a kind of “re-story-ation” of Hebraic stories. I term this part of my CEP midrashic, which, according to the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is “the fruit of centuries of spiritual life forming a chain of

reterritorializes self along the contours of a language spoken carelessly, harboring abjection, and they speak to all the sorrows of colonial translation when not attended to in their existential, political, cultural, and intersubjective relations.” For the violent legacy of boarding schools closer to home in Missoula, Montana, see “The Incarcerated Child and St. Ignatius Mission Schools,” by Kristy Bixler, Zoe Dansie, and Madison Haynes, available at <https://medium.com/@kristybixler95/the-incarcerated-child-and-st-ignatius-mission-schools-366fc3541099>.

⁴⁰ Neely, 22.

⁴¹ Christopher Pexa, *Translated Nation*, 39.

⁴² A significant portion of laws in the Torah and their elaborations in rabbinic discourse are laws pertaining to agriculture.

tradition in which thought is at once transmitted and renewed.”⁴³ This is a kind of spatio-temporal translation to make some of the wisdom of Jewish traditions available and relevant to life in the particularities of Nł?aycčstm in the twenty-first century, or what some people would call the Anthropocene (or the Capitalocene, or the Chthulucene, or the Plantationocene). Finally, I hope that my contributions to the PEAS Farm native plant garden challenge the colonial erasure of Native peoples’, specifically Séliš-Qłispé, relationship with land. I hope that the garden can become a concrete location for decolonial translation—translating the experiences between victims and perpetrators or beneficiaries of colonization that all the while remains vigilant to the historical facts of colonization and the ways it manifests today as coloniality—and promoting Séliš-Qłispé language and cultural revitalization, sovereignty, and connection with land.

⁴³ Levinas, 39.

“Red Osier Spiders”⁴⁴ :רמז

The color of cut flesh, red osier
dogwood spires sever
the white snow alongside
the narrow canal roads crawling
through Jocko Canyon. These
canals were built by suyuyapi
one hundred years ago to advance
only the interests of yeomen farmers,
foreigners who imported inside
seed bags and bibles another
framework for viewing all things.

The second past dusk my smallest
son sees what I cannot—the giant spiny
spiders with no eyes or face skittering
across the airspace in my bedroom.

⁴⁴ Cahoon, 60.

V. Second Theoretical Applications: Thoreau

A significant component of Henry David Thoreau's project in his written work is to develop a particular account of perception. In her book, *Bird Relics*, Branka Arsić makes clear this thread in Thoreau. She writes, "It would be stating the obvious to say that the question of perception preoccupies Thoreau."⁴⁵ In particular, Arsić explains, Thoreau wanted an account of perception that gives him "access [to] what surrounds us literally"—one's environment—that is, a "new sensing to defy the self's separation from its surroundings" so "that the self will reconnect with the world."⁴⁶ Thoreau develops this new account of perception through detailed analyses of sight and sound, vision and listening.

Thoreau's "New Sensing"

According to Arsić, Thoreau wants access to the literal world through developing an "intense empiricism"⁴⁷ that "abandons the traditional philosophical belief that human access to nature must always be mediated by concepts."⁴⁸ In order to accomplish this, one's sense of hearing and one's sense of sight must "be trained to register sensorial experiences beyond any figuration or as he puts it, 'ideation.'"⁴⁹ Ideation is the process of creating an idea in one's mind of the thing which one senses physically. Understood in this way, ideation mediates the self and the self's surroundings through concepts and representations. Thoreau considers the eye as the epitome of ideation. In fact, ideation is "the eye's habit through which the specificity of what is perceived now is sacrificed by being incorporated into an idea of it that the mind has formed on the basis of previous perceptions; the singularity of the present is thus lost in the ideality of an image."⁵⁰ The eye turns what it sees into a picture in the mind and thus what is visible becomes reduced to a

⁴⁵ Arsić, 54.

⁴⁶ Arsić, 54-55.

⁴⁷ Arsić, 55.

⁴⁸ Arsić, 48.

⁴⁹ Arsić, 56.

⁵⁰ Arsić, 56.

representation of the real thing. What is seen is represented “as it is not.” And so through the eye’s habit of ideation, the representation of the visible “amount[s] to its fictionalization. What is commonly called the visible world is thus already an effect of mimesis: it is a fiction or a fable.”⁵¹

But Thoreau, contrary to the majority of the western philosophical canon, thinks that we can get “beyond any figuration or... ‘ideation’” to the literal world that surrounds us. He argues for what Arsić terms “free looking.” Thoreau writes, “Go not to the object let it come to you... -What I need is not to look at all-but a true sauntering of the eye.”⁵² Arsić explains that free looking releases the eye from the need to recognize that which it sees “as something known and classifiable.”⁵³ The free eye has no need to make sense of that which it sees and foregoes the process of ideation. This is important for Thoreau because the free eye is able to see the “practical truth” of its surroundings, which is

the fact that life, empirically, escapes forms, that out of each form there grows moss in all directions, rendering form formless... the free eye, then, sees the incessant process of generation that undoes shapes, the very practice of life revealing the empirical in the plethora of its mobile differences.⁵⁴

And yet the eye and vision still remain, at least metaphorically and symbolically, less significant for Thoreau than does the ear and hearing. Arsić argues that “hearing rather than seeing becomes for Thoreau something of an exemplary perceptual experience.”⁵⁵ Commenting on quite an interesting statement from Thoreau that “The five senses are but so many modified ears,”⁵⁶ Arsić explains that the ear, much more so than the eye, is not in control of what it hears. Where the eye gazes upon objects of sight, sounds confront the ear. And so Arsić writes:

⁵¹ Arsić, 57.

⁵² Thoreau quoted in Arsić, 57.

⁵³ Arsić, 57.

⁵⁴ Arsić, 58.

⁵⁵ Arsić, 59.

⁵⁶ Thoreau quoted in Arsić, 59.

In the case of listening, then, external materiality—actual sonorous vibration—literally or physically enters the perceiver’s interiority. In listening—more obviously than in seeing—the perceiver hosts in himself a sound external to him, which is why listening can inherently subdue the perceiver to the point of turning him into the perceived, annulling the difference between external and internal.⁵⁷

What Arsić calls Thoreau’s “unprejudiced ears,” much like the free eye, are “astonishingly emptied of expectation.”⁵⁸ Whereas the eye, even the free eye, remains mired by its intentionality (its self-directedness) the ear is not. And by “fusing the senses with the sensed, and by refusing all idealizing figuration, clear ears finally access the materiality of the aural sensible, as if recovering it .”⁵⁹

However, one might question the metaphor of the ear in this regard for, of course, neither the ear nor the act of listening are perfect. On page 59 Arsić writes,

Yet, despite this extraordinary capacity of listening to allow a reality external to the mind to inhabit that mind, Thoreau discovers that tuning the mind to a sonorous reality still requires hollowing out its habitual sensorial patterns. He finds that the aural field no less than the visual is susceptible to figuration that ideates what is empirical. . . . whereas the ear is not intentional in the sense that the eye is—it doesn’t have the power to focus or close itself by will—it has nevertheless been conditioned to identify certain combinations of sounds as harmonious.

What I want to note here is—and I will come back to this in the next section—that what is needed is a *modality of consciousness* that is shaped by hearing rather than vision, not an emphasis on the literal senses of sight or hearing. Whereas sight is governed by intentionality, hearing is governed by what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls “inspiration.”

Hebraic Listening as “Consciousness Termed Hearing”

Arsić’s analysis of perception in Thoreau sticks mainly to Thoreau’s journals and his book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Thoreau’s project to develop a “new sensing” arises

⁵⁷ Arsić, 59.

⁵⁸ Arsić, 64.

⁵⁹ Arsić, 61.

quite clearly, too, in *Walden*, most prominently in the chapter, “Sounds.” In this chapter, Thoreau meditates on the sounds of the train that charges through his sylvan neighborhood and the sounds of the other-than-human creatures that occupy those woods, particularly the nocturnal creatures. But Thoreau begins this meditation with a particular task in mind: “But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard.”⁶⁰

For the core seminar on Thoreau, taught by Dr. Paul Muench, I wrote a paper in which I argued, through a close reading of the text, that, in “Sounds,” Thoreau attempts to develop the capacity to hear in much the same way that Arsić suggests Thoreau attempts to establish an account of perception that gives him direct access to the world that surrounds him, or, more precisely, gives his surroundings direct entry into his interiority. In *Walden*, this task is framed as remembering or learning “the language which all things and events speak without metaphor” by paying close attention to the sounds of one’s surroundings.

At this point, you might be wondering: What does Thoreau have to do with my goal to conceive of and enact a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relation with land? Thank you for wondering this. It leads me directly to my next point: That Thoreau attempted to develop a “new sensing” epitomized by the ear finds good company in many strains of Jewish traditions.

According to Rabbi Ellen Bernstein,⁶¹

⁶⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, 108.

⁶¹ The context in which this arises for Bernstein is actually a contestation of the dominance of hearing in Jewish traditions and to promote the goodness of sight and the visual beauty of creation: “Hearing and seeing may be two necessary parts of a whole. Just as the character of light can only be fully understood through knowledge of both particles and waves, perhaps nature can only be fully understood through the integration of sight and hearing... I’m building this case for seeing, because I believe at the heart of the environmental crisis is a perceptual problem. If we don’t take sight seriously, then neither will we take the primary object of sight, nature, seriously” (101).

Rabbi Norman Lamm, a respected contemporary leader,⁶² argues that “hearing” is the superior sense. “Seeing,” he says, “leads to idolatry; the worshipper creates an icon to represent what he saw”... There is no question that the Israelites had a refined sense of hearing. The people “heard” the voice of God at Sinai and most of the patriarchs were “called” to service. The central prayer of the Jewish liturgy commands us—“Hear, O Israel.” Philosophers have asserted that whereas the Greeks thought with the eye, the Hebrews thought with the ear.⁶³

Thus, a discussion of perception in Thoreau flows neatly into the development of the distinctly Jewish *conceptual* aspect of my CEP.

As Rabbi Bernstein suggests, philosophers have indeed argued that whereas Greek thought (i.e. western philosophy, generally) thinks with the eye, Hebraic thought thinks with the ear. Emmanuel Levinas, for example, has argued this in his book, *Totality and Infinity*.⁶⁴ Reflecting Thoreau’s critique of the ideation of the eye, Levinas writes, “The connection between vision and touch, between representation and labor, remains essential. Vision moves into grasp.”⁶⁵ Vision reduces objects of sight to forms, mere representations of the actual thing that confronts the seer. This is how vision becomes touch, it becomes a violent grasping as reductionistic categorization of, in Levinas’s terms, the radical alterity of the face of the Other. It is clear that Levinas wages a very similar critique of western thought as Thoreau does, but it is important to note that Thoreau’s and Levinas’s positive construction of perception are quite different. Whereas Thoreau attempts to account for a kind of human perception that would grant direct access to the world around us, Levinas remains opposed to unmediated experience. For Levinas, we only ever experience the “trace” of others, we only ever experience what is left behind their “real presence.” I turn now to a reading of Levinas from Sol Neely to develop a different and more distinctly Jewish and decolonial account of perception than Thoreau’s.

⁶² Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm ZT”L passed away on May 31, 2020.

⁶³ Bernstein, 100.

⁶⁴ To make this claim requires accepting that Levinas’s philosophical project was to “translate Jewish sources into ‘Greek,’” as Annette Aronowicz puts it in the “Translator’s Introduction” to Levinas’s *Nine Talmudic Readings*, ix.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 191.

Sol Neely picks up on Levinas's critique of vision. In contrast to "a consciousness of *seeing*, shaped by a private ontology of self," Neely develops what Levinas calls a "consciousness termed hearing' that is irreducibly relational, performative, and storied."⁶⁶ According to Neely, "For Levinas, the first movement of phenomenology within a consciousness termed hearing is not intentionality but inspiration, which he links to the literalness of *respiration*—by which we breathe in into vitality and breathe out into vulnerability."⁶⁷ This is important for two reasons. First, this reveals the way in which Levinas was influenced by his "Jewish source material,"⁶⁸ which is the Oral Torah, or the Hebraic oral literary tradition. Second, not only does this reveal Levinas's sources, but it also opens to the possibility of an appeal to oral literary traditions in general. For Neely, this leads to a reading of Levinas through an Indigenous "inspired eco-phenomenology."⁶⁹ That is, we can finally "encounter wisdom in its place"⁷⁰ without "re-inscribing coloniality"⁷¹—we can become environmentally responsible in a way that fundamentally challenges and begins to address the deep harms of Euro-American colonization—through a "consciousness termed hearing" because, per Neely reading Levinas,

It's not that sound is the medium of utterances; it's that utterances become the medium of sound itself. The sounds and noises of nature disappoint when they are not heard from the point of view of the utterance, when they remain mired in the tranquility and materiality of things at rest, registered only in the medium of sound with all its aesthetic self-sufficiency. In contrast, it is the *social relation*—the irreducible kinship relation expressed by "all my relations"—*the utterance itself of ancestry* and place by which the noise and sounds of nature are at last heard through an inspired eco-phenomenology.⁷² (Emphasis in original)

⁶⁶ Neely, "Becoming Human in Lingit Aani," 6.

⁶⁷ Neely, "Unsettling Experience, Perception, and Display," 3.

⁶⁸ Neely, "Unsettling Experience, Perception, and Display," 3.

⁶⁹ Neely, "Becoming Human in Lingit Aani," 18.

⁷⁰ Neely, "Becoming Human in Lingit Aani," 3.

⁷¹ Neely, "Becoming Human in Lingit Aani," 1. For Neely, "taking up wisdom in its place [risks] re-inscribing coloniality at the level of signification" because the situation of places anywhere and everywhere in the US and, especially for my project here in the context of Nl̓ʔayc̓stm, is "irrevocably conditioned by centuries of moral, aesthetic, and cultural colonialism" (2-3).

⁷² Neely, "Becoming Human in Lingit Aani," 19.

Contra Thoreau, we do not have access to the sights and sounds of our surroundings devoid of any mediating factors. But this need not be environmentally or theoretically detrimental. By adopting “fundamentally different modalities of consciousness,” perception itself “is transformed as different qualities of being become legible across different registers of consciousness.”⁷³ And one of those different modalities of consciousness is one that is attuned to the land “which is always already storied and ecological in ways that cultures of usurpation are historically tone deaf toward.”⁷⁴ What Levinas refers to as “fundamental historicity” or “diachrony” is for Neely understood as ancestry, which refers to the lives and teachings of those (humans and more-than-humans) who have gone before, particular to the people who have lived in a land since time immemorial. Ancestry is the fact that land is the land of a people who have lived there for generations upon generations and know deeply the stories of the land, as well as the fact of, most certainly anywhere in the U.S., settler-colonial violence in and on the land of Indigenous peoples. We find ourselves always already in storied land and thus “we find ourselves already responsible for healing the wounds of historical violence prior to our deliberation and prior to *hearing* the terms of what that responsibility entails.”⁷⁵

So, reading Thoreau alongside Hebraic traditions, Emmanuel Levinas, and Sol Neely has led me to an important conceptual element of my project: central to a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land is a “consciousness termed hearing” that is attuned to the histories (of violence and usurpation) and stories (of ancestry and kinship) that make one’s location in land ethically legible. But what about the second part of my project, *to enact* this relationship? Contributing to the PEAS Farm native plant garden is, to my mind, an attempt to take up Neely’s conclusions. I live in Séliš-Qlispé land. I see the garden as an opportunity to

⁷³ Neely, “Unsettling Experience, Perception, and Display,” 3.

⁷⁴ Neely, “Becoming Human in Lingit Aani,” 4.

⁷⁵ Neely, “Becoming Human in Lingit Aani,” 21.

recognize the histories and stories of this land through acknowledging Séliš-Q̓lispé sovereignty and settler-colonial usurpation of their land by contributing to a space that is conducive to Séliš language and cultural revitalization and, ultimately, inhabitation and political sovereignty in their homelands—that is, land back.

From “Meditations on Blue”⁷⁶ :שָׁבֵי

because q^wáy the word for blue also describes my concepts
of black and green I attempt to reconcile these differing
perspectives held captive in a word

...

I read that *we categorize to create meaning therefore*
it is possible
to change meaning by recategorizing

⁷⁶ Cahoon, 36-38.

VI. Third Theoretical Applications: Philosophy and Animals

A third core seminar pertinent to my CEP is “Philosophy and Animals,” which I took with Dr. Soazig Le Bihan. This course explored a wide range of philosophical topics relevant to non-human animals such as animal cognition, animal ethics, and intersectionality (of justice issues for non-human animals and for humans). I spent most of the semester reflecting on ethics and wildlife policy—in particular, wolves in Montana and flying-foxes in Australia. For the purposes of this CEP, I want to reflect on what I learned from Deborah Bird Rose and her flying-fox teachers.

The Shimmer of Creation

Shimmer by Deborah Bird Rose is a unique book. It is the last book written by an incredible anthropologist who died of cancer in 2018. According to Rose, this book “explores in-between places of interactions marked by love, compassion, generosity and care.”⁷⁷ She takes head on the challenges faced by a very peculiar species of flying mammals, Australian flying-foxes. Rose’s main concern is to express the vivacious multispecies mutualisms that make up life on earth, through a close encounter with flying-foxes. There is no limit to the scope of this book, for living “with flying-foxes,” Rose came to understand, “takes us straight to the heart of every big question facing Earth life in the twenty-first century.”⁷⁸

The book explains and denounces the human violence against flying-foxes in Australia, what Rose powerfully and soberly calls “deathwork.”⁷⁹ This includes rising temperatures from anthropogenic climate change, killing them as if they were pests with guns,⁸⁰ and dispersion through actual warfare tactics like poisoning, camp destruction, bounty systems, biological

⁷⁷ Rose, 18.

⁷⁸ Rose, 3.

⁷⁹ Rose, 149.

⁸⁰ Rose, 167.

control, flame throwers, explosives, and other atrocities.⁸¹ But Rose also goes to great lengths to express the exuberance, the great shimmer of joy and goodness that flying-foxes bring to the world, even in the face of great suffering:

The story is bleak, but it is not only about death. Flying-foxes interact with humans in networks focused on kinship, care, rescue, advocacy and research. Human beings offer love and commitment; they bring assistance, bear witness and, through their actions, testify to an interspecies ethic that responds to suffering and, at the same time, praises the gifts that flying-foxes bring to the world.⁸²

Here, Deborah Bird Rose develops a profound concept through which we can *affirm* and *praise* the gifts of flying-foxes, a concept that she simply terms, “Yes!”

“Yes!,” according to Rose, “is the great powerhouse of life on earth.”⁸³ Yes!, “asserts the value of life over the powers of destruction, and flows through living creatures in all their fidelity to their own way of life, their new generations, their mutualisms, and their flamboyance.”⁸⁴ And, for humans, “saying yes to life is a profound ethical choice. It is an embrace of the living world, a grateful response to the gifts of life, a pledge of solidarity with Earth’s way of becoming, and a commitment to witness the work of life.”⁸⁵ In *Shimmer*, Rose offers a reflection on how we might respond to a world that is filled with historical and ongoing violence. One way, says Rose, is to stubbornly and joyously affirm, against economies of death, the goodness of creation—the exuberance, the splendor, the *shimmer* of creation.

Affirming the Goodness of Creation

There’s much more I might say about Deborah Bird Rose’s final and magnificent book, but here seems the perfect moment to make connections with my project to conceive and enact a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land. To begin, there is an explicit linguistic

⁸¹ Rose, 184.

⁸² Rose, 3.

⁸³ Rose, 211.

⁸⁴ Rose, 211.

⁸⁵ Rose, 211.

and conceptual connection between Rose's "Yes!" and a central Hebraic term, הִנְנִי (hineni). הִנְנִי is often translated as "here I am," and is the ultimate affirmation and embrace of responsibility. According to Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, הִנְנִי "is a pure, astonished, unguarded affirmation given before all the facts are known. It is a spontaneous, unequivocal commitment promising: "I am here," where and as you found me, fully attentive, focused, all in."⁸⁶ And Emmanuel Levinas describes הִנְנִי as responsibility when he writes that "The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other, for whom and before whom I am responsible, of this very giving of signs, that is, of this responsibility: 'here I am.'⁸⁷ הִנְנִי, then is both affirmation and responsibility. Another possible translation of הִנְנִי might just be "Yes!"⁸⁸

One tangible example Rose describes of saying "Yes!" to becoming responsible for flying-foxes is the on-the-ground work of "carers," those people who "refuse to justify the suffering of others, refuse to abandon others, and refuse to translate the work of care into a politics of expediency."⁸⁹ These are people who voluntarily spend their time caring for suffering flying-foxes through acts such as: cooling down overheated flying-foxes "by spraying them with mist,"⁹⁰ disentangling flying-foxes from nettings that cover orchards, taking in injured flying-foxes and treating their wounds, or even fostering baby flying-foxes who have lost their mothers.⁹¹ "Yes!" is both a *refusal* to ignore suffering and a *fidelity* to life.⁹²

Rose also suggests that affirming the goodness of flying-foxes, their mutualisms, and creation or life in general can lead to *praise*. Recall a quote from earlier: "Human beings offer

⁸⁶ Cardin, "The Deepest Meanings of Hineni."

⁸⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 144-145.

⁸⁸ James Hatley expressed this to me in a personal conversation. He said that, once, Deborah Bird Rose asked him if "Yes!" would be an accurate translation of הִנְנִי.

⁸⁹ Rose, 224.

⁹⁰ Rose, 48.

⁹¹ See Rose, chapter three, "Arts of Care."

⁹² On "fidelity," see Rose, 211.

love and commitment; they bring assistance, bear witness and, through their actions, testify to an interspecies ethic that responds to suffering and, at the same time, *praises the gifts that flying-foxes bring to the world.*⁹³ I want to suggest that one possible way we might take up the responsibility to say “Yes!” to the goodness of creation, in addition to more tangible attempts to alleviate suffering, is by offering *blessings* for creation.

In *The Splendor of Creation*, Rabbi Ellen Bernstein discusses the ways creatures adapt to and depend upon the habitats in which they live, such that many are virtually unable to successfully adapt to drastic changes in their habitats. In this discussion, she references Rabbi Akiva in a section from Talmud, Chullin 127a. Rabbi Akiva is recorded as stating:

“How great are Your works, O Lord” (Psalms 104:24). You have creatures that grow in the sea and you have creatures that grow on land. If those in the sea would ascend to the land they would immediately die. If those that are on land would descend to the sea they would immediately die. Similarly, you have creatures that grow in the fire and you have creatures that grow in the air. If those in the fire would ascend to the air they would immediately die. If those in the air would descend to the fire they would immediately die. Therefore, “how great are Your works, O Lord.”⁹⁴

Rabbi Akiva’s statement comes from a larger discussion in Chullin 126b5-127a19 wherein the rabbis argue about ritual impurity and, more specifically, which non-human creatures impart impurity when touched—and this all framed around a line from ויקרא (Leviticus) 11:29: “The following shall be impure for you from among the things that swarm on the earth: the mole, the mouse, and great lizards of every variety.”⁹⁵ The debate goes back and forth until Rabbi Akiva appears and basically says, “Enough of this talk of a half-flesh or half-earth mouse! Creatures must remain in their environments to survive, and how wonderful it is that Adonai made it so!”

⁹³ Rose, 3 (emphasis added).

⁹⁴ Chullin 127a:10-11.

⁹⁵ In Hebrew: וְהָיָה לָכֶם הַטְּמֵא בַּשָּׂרָץ הַשָּׂרָץ עַל-הָאָרֶץ הַחֲלֵד וְהַעֲכָבִר וְהַגָּב לְמִינֵהוּ: Text taken from <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.11.29?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

And, as if nothing happened, the discussion reverts back to considering non-human creatures and ritual impurity.

James Hatley has written about Rabbi Akiva's interjection in his essay, "Praising Salmon: Creaturely Discernment in a Time of Species Metacide." Hatley explains that Rabbi Akiva *disturbs* the discussion about which creatures are "inappropriate for inclusion within the human dimension" and "in doing so reminds his interlocutors that what is unclean and inappropriate from one perspective becomes blessed and worthy of affirmation when viewed from another. Creation, it turns out, is manifold in its values!" Here, Hatley offers an insight that we are called to praise the praising of creation (I'll return to creation's praises shortly), which, I think, is precisely the work of saying "Yes!" to "the lush, extravagant beauty, flamboyance and dazzling seductiveness" of earthly life that Rose calls us to.⁹⁶

Hatley elaborates two dimensions of praise, what he terms Hineni and Hallelujah. Hineni, for Hatley, is "mindfully beholding and so providing one's witness for how another is in some manner preeminent and commands through that preeminence one's own attention to them."⁹⁷ One's praise is inspired by and offered to the other whom one praises, foregoing the very possibility that one was in control of their expression to begin with. Encountering the other, one is commanded to respond affirmatively, "here I am," or "Yes!"

Hallelujah, which might be translated from the Hebrew as "praise the Creator," grows out of Hatley's reading of the last three chapters of תהילים (Psalms 148-150). In these chapters, all of creation is described as giving praise to their Creator. Consider, for example, the extravagant beauty of Eucalypts that Rose describes as offering a "great, vivid, multisensorial call: Yes!" to flying-foxes and other pollinators. Flying-foxes "come racing to the blossoming trees" in all their

⁹⁶ Rose, 228.

⁹⁷ Hatley, 7.

own magnificence of flight and bodies which are “perfectly adapted for sucking up nectar, and their delicate whiskers that pick up pollen and distribute over 70 per cent of it intact.”⁹⁸ Whether or not one would like to imagine this relationship of reciprocal care as tree- and pollinator-praises to a creator, I think it is quite apparent that these creatures’ lives and actions are themselves deeply worthy of praise. The Jewish imagination of תהילים figures the non-human creatures’ praises as coming before those of the human; in this light, Hatley suggests that

a strong argument can also be made for a mode of praise that is robustly attuned to the creaturely, rather than one that is immediately theological. In this attunement the very speech emerging from one’s mouth is revealed already to be an offering on behalf of another living kind for the sake of how that creature in its own way in turn praises the Creator. Not only humans are involved in praising the Most High. Salmon too must be attended to. Indeed, if the ordering of Psalm 148 is to be taken at its word, they are in line before us.⁹⁹

That is, in the Hebrew Scriptures, all the diverse kinds of creation are understood to praise their Creator in their own particular way. And Rabbi Akiva’s praise of this praising of creation is an exemplary model for how we humans might offer our “love and commitment” to other creatures, what Rose calls a kind of “interspecies ethic.”¹⁰⁰

But what is it, exactly, for humans to praise the praising of other creatures? Here several thousand years of Jewish practice is helpful. Jewish praise often comes in the form of a ברכה (blessing). ברכות (blessings) are made, indeed, as an act of giving thanks—but, importantly, they are acts of *giving*. A ברכה is a kind of generous offering given in responsivity—responsibility—to or for another being. It is an expression of הנהג or Rose’s “Yes!” and it is an expression of what Hatley means by praise. Rabbi Bernstein explains that the “rabbis believed that one way to give back is to pause throughout the day to express gratitude. They suggested making one hundred blessings a day to train us

⁹⁸ Rose, 228.

⁹⁹ Hatley, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Rose, 3.

to remember the myriad of gifts and to return the gift by pouring back our love.”¹⁰¹

Making a ברכה is Jewish protocol in response to receiving and it is also a kind of activity with “material consequences in the world.”¹⁰² And so, according to the rabbis (Rabbi Akiva, in fact), “A person is forbidden to taste anything before he recites a blessing, as without reciting praise over food, it has the status of a consecrated item, from which one is forbidden to derive pleasure.”¹⁰³

As a practical example, one of the most common ברכות that I find myself making on Séliš-Qlispé land in western Montana is the ברכה for “lightning, or natural wonders like a comet, majestic mountains, great rivers” which is:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, עוֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית

or, in English: blessed are you, Creator, sovereign of the world, “who does the work of Creation (literally, who makes the making of ‘in-the-beginning’).”¹⁰⁴

To sum up, then, we have from Rose one of the ways in which it is necessary to respond to historical and ongoing violence: affirmation of the goodness of creation and accepting responsibility to address the violence in whatever ways we are capable of. This might be simply stated as “Yes!” or the Hebrew הַגַּב. Following this thread, we have found that this can look like

¹⁰¹ Bernstein, 66. For the rabbinic expression to make 100 ברכות every day, see Menachot 43b:15.

¹⁰² Bernstein, 67. Of course, what those “material consequences” might be is an interesting question. Bernstein thinks it’s more than just “to purify ourselves, not just to see the world anew,” it’s not just a material consequence on our personal psychology or mental health (67). She connects it to the “cycle of giving and receiving” which “must be complete” (67). Taking something without making the proper ברכה is akin to robbery. The closest expression from Bernstein about how this is the case is quite vague. She explains that eating a fruit from a plant without expressing one’s gratitude to that plant through a ברכה robs the plant “of its energy” (67). I’m not exactly sure what this might mean and would require further study and thought to make any conclusions.

¹⁰³ Berakhot 35a:2. The full dialectic from which this conclusion follows is instructional: “GEMARA: Concerning the fundamental basis for blessings, the Gemara asks: From where are these matters, the obligation to recite a blessing before eating, derived? The Gemara answers: As the Sages taught in the Sifra: With regard to saplings, it is stated that in their fourth year their fruit will be: “...sanctified for praises before the Lord” (Leviticus 19:24). This verse teaches that they require praise of God in the form of a blessing both beforehand and thereafter, as the verse says praises in the plural. From here, Rabbi Akiva said: A person is forbidden to taste anything before he recites a blessing, as without reciting praise over food, it has the status of a consecrated item, from which one is forbidden to derive pleasure.” This discussion is about “the fundamental basis for blessings” and is derived from a verse about “praises.” Blessing, then, is intimately connected to praise.

¹⁰⁴ Prager, 193.

“praising the praise” of other creatures.¹⁰⁵ And this might be accomplished practically by reciting a Hebrew ברכה (blessing).

Connections to my CEP

And how is all of this relevant to my CEP? I think the connections for conceiving of a distinctly Jewish relationship with land are quite clear as most of what I’ve just discussed is directly related to Jewish concepts and practices. I’d like to make connections here to two elements of the enactment of that relationship with land about which I have yet to say much, the reading group and the Tu BiShvat celebration I organized.

First, how does a Jewish environmental reading group address the historical and ongoing violence of settler colonialism on and against Séliš-Qlispé land? How does a reading group address anthropogenic climate change, for instance? This was, in some sense, an ongoing tension that I faced while leading the reading group. We often discussed environmental and social issues, but what good does that do or what “material consequences” does that have? This, of course, isn’t something I could easily answer in just one paragraph. However, I think it is fairly obvious that discussing with other like-minded folks what the issues are and *how* one might address those issues personally and collectively is beneficial and productive. More controversially, though, if we take the rabbis seriously that even making a ברכה has an important effect on the world, I think we might begin to see additional and creative ways in which we might respond to the crises and violences we are tasked with addressing, such that a reading group that explores Jewish understandings of human relationships with the more-than-human world might itself become a meaningful act of resistance and activism.

Second, Tu BiShvat is an especially ברכה-oriented holiday. Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein writes that “Tu Bishvat is a time when this kind of spiritual consciousness around blessings [which are

¹⁰⁵ And, one might argue, even the land itself.

seen as a conduit for spiritual and physical potential] becomes much more accessible.”¹⁰⁶ That is, Tu BiShvat is a holiday that is entirely about recognizing the beauty and goodness of creation and, through interpretations developed by Jewish mystics throughout the past millennia, continuously offering ברכות for creation. Significantly, Rabbi Bernstein explains that, for “the kabbalists,¹⁰⁷ the point of the [Tu BiShvat] seder is to repair the world”¹⁰⁸: “The more fruit you eat and the more wine you drink, the more blessings you’re required to say, the more the earth is healed.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Rothstein, “The Power of Jewish Blessings.”

¹⁰⁷ This refers, broadly, to Jewish mystics and especially those who reinvigorated Tu BiShvat (Bernstein, 71).

¹⁰⁸ Bernstein, 72.

¹⁰⁹ Bernstein, 71.

VII. Some Conclusions on Conceiving and Enacting a Distinctly Jewish and Decolonial Relationship with Land

In concluding the theoretical section of my CEP, I'd like to say something brief about what I mean by “decolonial” in my project to conceive of and enact a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land. Decolonial is meant to signal the larger movement of decolonization. Decolonization, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang tell us, is not metaphorical, but is literally about “the repatriation of Indigenous land and life.”¹¹⁰ I think of my project as decolonial because I understand it as—from the position of a white settler occupying stolen Séliš-Qlispé land—first and foremost a promotion of the repatriation of Indigenous lands. Though my project isn't literally giving land back to Indigenous peoples, I still think of it as decolonial, i.e. promoting land back, because I am attempting to enact ways of inhabiting land that ultimately recognize Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over their lands and facilitate a consciousness in (especially Jewish) settler inhabitants of Indigenous lands that might lead to literal land back. More specifically, I see this project as decolonial by, first, promoting Indigenous sovereignty through centering Séliš language and cultural revitalization in a space on the PEAS Farm that is designated and made explicitly available for Indigenous peoples. And, second, I see this project as decolonial *by challenging settler-colonial relations with land through turning to the dimensions of my traditions that are otherwise than colonial*—that offer different understandings of and relationships with land than as mere property.

Instead of a settler-colonial land-as-property conception of land, an inquiry into a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land has led me to some initial conclusions about what this otherwise than colonial relationship with land could include. First, this relationship might be termed midrashic: a kind of spatio-temporal translation to make some of

¹¹⁰ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 1.

the wisdom of Jewish traditions available and relevant to contemporary life in a specific place. Second, this relationship would occur within a “consciousness of hearing” that is open to oral traditions and both the stories and histories of a particular place or land. Third, this relationship would be characterized by **הינני** (hineni), an embrace of responsibility to and affirmation of the goodness of creation through practices of praise and blessing. Fourth, and, ultimately, this relationship with land would recognize Indigenous peoples’ relationships with their homelands and the simple truth that anyone who is not native to the particular land in which they live is a guest—and being a guest means abandoning the settler colonial project and committing to and following the specificities of protocol for guests in those particular lands.

“The Salish Root Word for Water”¹¹¹ :סד

Half my life was lived in dreams of water. Night’s long hours immersed me in standing, rushing, churning, falling, frozen water. *You are asking to be worthy of something*, says my friend. She tells me that the Salish root word for water is *séw*, a verb meaning to ask for permission or information, to make a plea to be worthy.

So much is said in this word: séwłk^w.

¹¹¹ Cahoon, 25.

VIII. Actions Taken

In many ways, my CEP emerged even as I attempted to enact it. My CEP is not so much the tasks and projects I pursued, but the process of pursuing a CEP in the first place. As I wrote this section of my CEP portfolio, some parts and details of my CEP were still working themselves out.

My CEP began to emerge when, in the early fall of 2023, Jim Hatley and I began meeting at Tandem Bakery in Missoula every couple of weeks or so to discuss the potential of curating, in Jim's terms, a "green team" at Har Shalom. Over discussions and vegan pastries, Jim and I dreamt about this possibility when Jim suggested the idea of beginning with a reading group centered on Jewish environmental thinking with an emphasis on Jewish ritual practice and thought. I was, of course, elated. We proffered the idea to Har Shalom's leadership who supported our pursuits. Jim generously and graciously (as have been recurrent features of Jim's character throughout our growing friendship) offered to let me take the reins of this reading group and, perhaps, turn it into the project I needed for my MA program. I accepted, insisting that Jim still have a leadership role (since it was his idea and I could not lead this group without him) and we decided to be partners in this project—although he repeatedly gave me opportunities to take the lead and grow as an educator and as a group facilitator. So, Jim and I continued meeting and digitally corresponding with Har Shalom's leaders to get this group off the ground.

As Jim and I were planning this reading group, I pondered how I might accomplish something in my CEP that had a distinctly decolonial agenda and actually benefited Indigenous peoples in my community. I had the idea of the native plant garden that centered a decolonial project I was aware of on the Flathead Reservation which also had an international resonance:

language revitalization. I emailed Cameron and Aspen Decker, who I knew had been active in promoting Séliš language, culture, and traditional place-based practices and decided to see if they would be interested in collaborating. Turns out—they were! They decided they could help with determining the names of the native plants as well as to help lead an event at the garden. Aspen told me that she thought this garden could be an opportunity to move in the direction of land back or, at least, provide a space for Séliš peoples to gather traditional foods from their aboriginal homelands. I hadn't thought of it this way until she said this and this is what inspired me to make land back and accessibility for Indigenous peoples central features of the garden. I applied for \$2,000 from the University of Montana's Experiential Learning Scholarship Fund in order to fairly compensate Cameron and Aspen for their energy and work. I wouldn't hear if I received this specific funding opportunity until March 15th, so in the meantime I focused on finding a garden to work in facilitating the Jewish environmental reading group.

For the reading group: Once Har Shalom let us put the word out about the reading group in their email newsletter, which happened in November, things really just fell into place. Rabbi Emerita Laurie Franklin supported the idea from the beginning and offered to help out in any way she could. I eventually asked if she would lead the Tu BiShvat celebration, which she did with great success and ritual elegance. The Montana Jewish Project in Helena got word of the reading group and contributed to advertisement by making a wonderful digital flyer and sending it around their community. Word spread far and fast and my inbox filled up with interested participants. Even Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, the author of the book we would be reading for the group, heard about it. She asked Jim if she might join in at some point. We, of course, said yes!

The group met over zoom weekly on Monday nights for nine weeks. There was a consistent group of about eight or so participants, which proved to be just the perfect amount of

people for what we were trying to do. Jim and I got together each week to prepare for the next study group. It took a few weeks for us to find our rhythm, but eventually we settled on a rotating schedule of leadership—Jim would facilitate discussion one week, I would take the next. Rabbi Laurie took week three of the study, February 6th, to lead the group in the Tu BiShvat celebration. Originally, we'd only planned to meet for eight weeks. But Rabbi Ellen Bernstein offered that if we had an additional ninth meeting on March 20th, she would join us and lead a discussion on her newer work. This worked out just perfectly—everyone in our group showed up for a lively discussion led by Rabbi Ellen. The only issue was that it was my spring break. I had, somewhat sporadically, driven with my partner and several friends to northeast New Mexico to find dry and decently warm weather to spend the week in. We ended up in Roy, New Mexico, on the east side of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range and not too far from the Oklahoma and Texas borders. And I had poor cell phone service. I found a small pizza *and* grocery shop and asked if I could use their wifi for my zoom meeting—but they closed just when I would need to start my meeting. They kindly offered to let me sit outside their store and use their wifi, even after they left. I bought a pizza—out of gratitude as much as hunger—and logged on to the last zoom meeting for the Jewish environmental study group that Jim and I had been planning for the better part of the previous year.

And, at last, I found out I wouldn't be getting funding from the university to pay Aspen and Cameron Decker to lead an event at the native plant garden. It was too late in the semester to try to find another funding option with enough time to actually get the event together. To my dismay, I had to tell Aspen and Cameron that the event would have to wait. I would continue to look for funding options and hold the event with Aspen and Cameron—who are still on board—later in the summer or the fall once the garden had received some serious attention. That

attention (up until the time of this writing) has meant: clearing out dead plants, weeding, planning where and which native plants to plant, purchasing plants, printing signs, mulching, landscaping (to reorient a walking path), and planning for ongoing maintenance (watering, more weeding, and mulching). In addition to Maggie's ethnobotany sign, I reached out to the Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee (SQCC) about installing their ethnogeographic sign for Nłʔayc̓stm in the native plant garden. This sign would be fantastic to have in the garden because it is created by Séliš-Qlispé, tells about their relationship with their homelands on their own terms, and contains a map of places with their Séliš place-names near the location of the garden. This project is still in the works and will involve meeting with the SQCC when they are available. Additionally, Dr. Paul Guernsey, a professor in environmental studies at the University of Montana, loved the project and wanted to help out in any way he could. He offered to buy the plants since I had no funding, helped in the garden weekly, and imagined ways to improve the garden in ways that aligned with promoting Indigenous sovereignty, land back, and cultural revitalization.

On the Saturday before finals week, spring 2023, I organized one final push for working in the garden. Including me, eight people showed up, whom I'd like to mention by name as a form of gratitude: Maggie Gammons, Caroline Stephens, Paul Guernsey, Maria Roberts, Zoey Ballard, Lyndsey Holloway, and Ebin Bland. We finished making the pathway, installed five of Maggie's ethnobotany signs, and planted three (Red Osier Dogwood), two (Blue Elderberry), and one sagebrush. There are more signs to install and more plants to plant; this native plant garden, thankfully, will be an ongoing project that I get to contribute to as long as I am in Nłʔayc̓stm, able, and willing.

After I had completed all of these projects, I gave a presentation of my CEP on UM's campus. A fairly large group showed up, most of whom I knew and had personally invited. But it was a time in which I was able to publicly describe my comprehensive project as well as thank each of those who helped it to come together.

IX. Accomplishments and Challenges

Finally, I would like to reflect on the results of my CEP and how I intend to continue the work I started with it.

The aim of my CEP was to conceive and enact a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land in the particularities of Ní?aycčstm (the Missoula area) through a Jewish environmental book study, a Tu BiShvat celebration, and contributing to a native plant garden in the particularities of Ní?aycčstm. The first two sub-projects, in my mind, were utterly successful. It gave me the opportunity to present my ideas and questions, to share my voice, of course, but it also provided the space to dialogue with other voices and hear new ideas and questions. I couldn't have asked for a more generous, open, and thoughtful group of people to engage in a Jewish environmental book study with. This also provided me the opportunity to facilitate community engaged education. I can't speak for the participants about whether or not they found the study educational or beneficial to them, but I found it to be a really useful opportunity for me to learn how to be an educator—and that doesn't necessarily mean a lecturer or a teacher, but to be somebody who opens up space for others to learn and explore important questions. Getting to work closely with Jim Hatley, too, as both mentor and colleague solidified this, for me, as a successful experience—and experiment—in community engaged education. And, finally, it was such a humbling and affirming experience to work directly with the author of the book we read for this project, Rabbi Ellen Bernstein, and have her participate in our final session.

The Tu BiShvat celebration, too, was a success. It ended up being much less involved than I had initially envisioned, but I am so happy with the way it turned out. I expected I would be leading a crowd of people I didn't know in a fairly formal Tu BiShvat seder. (I'm so glad I didn't do this!) Instead, I asked Rabbi Laurie Franklin to lead a celebration—much more casual

and inviting than a seder—of the holiday during one of our reading groups. In this way, Rabbi Laurie was able to make connections with our book study conversations and topics and flow the celebration right into a discussion of *The Splendor of Creation*. Rabbi Laurie is much more qualified than I to lead such a celebration and it was beautiful and everything I could have hoped for.

Finally, the native plant garden. There were two key dimensions to this project: the garden itself and an event at the garden. For each of these two dimensions were two key requirements: a place for the garden and funding for the event. I was able to find a place, the PEAS Farm, that already had a native plant garden and was willing and excited about having me work in it and this led to accomplishing one of the key dimensions of the project, making tangible contributions to a native plant garden. In the end, this was a success. I was able to: install several signs for native plants that center Séliš language and relationships with plants; make a pathway in the native plant garden in order to make it more accessible for folks to engage and, especially, for Native folks to harvest from; and plant several additional native food and medicinal plants. I can't thank enough all those who helped me with the native plant garden: Maggie Gammons, Caroline Stephens, Dave Victor, Paul Guernsey, and those mentioned in the previous section who showed up on a rainy Saturday before finals week.

But there were some challenges even with working in the garden. The winter was especially long, so I didn't have the chance to really do any work in the garden until early April and planting wasn't really an option until early May. Because of this, I wasn't able to do as much work in the garden by the end of the semester as I had hoped, but it was a great start. I do intend to continue working in the garden, but I'll say more about that in a moment.

The most significant challenge of my project—apart from the day-to-day work it takes to garden and facilitate a book study—was getting funding for an event at the native plant garden, in particular to pay Aspen and Cameron Decker for their work. I didn't get funding and so I was unable to accomplish this part of my CEP. I do have some thoughts for anyone who intends to apply for funding for a project like this: apply for funding as soon as you can and have multiple options. The main reason I wasn't able to get funding (apart from the fact that my project was denied funding) was that I didn't apply for funding until February (two and a half months before the event) and I only applied for one opportunity. If I had applied, say, the semester before, I would have known sooner whether or not I had funding for the project and how much and, if I hadn't gotten the funding, I could have tried for other funding opportunities. I didn't find out until March that I didn't get funding and at that point I had no other options for finding enough money for the event I wanted to put together.

I want to conclude with ways I intend to further the work that I began with this project as well as a bonus accomplishment I stumbled my way into. At this moment, I have no specific plans to lead any organized Jewish environmental events, though I am open to it. I am, however, excited to continue thinking about distinctly Jewish relationships with land. At this moment, I'm curious to explore what the concept, conditions, and experiences of exile and diaspora might mean for Jewish understandings of land. In particular, I would like to explore the notion of being a guest in Indigenous lands through the lens of Jewish diasporic solidarity. I have yet to understand exactly what this could mean practically, however; though the point, for me, would be to learn how to live well in a particular place (developing the "consciousness of hearing" that Levinas and Neely advocate) without succumbing to what Tuck and Yang call "settler adoption

fantasies.”¹¹² Instead of trying to “become native to this place” (as Wes Jackson might have it),¹¹³ one would remain true to who they are and learn how to inhabit Indigenous lands as a guest in someone else’s homelands through protocol specific to those lands.

I intend to continue working in the PEAS Farm native plant garden for as long as I exist in or around Níʔaycčstm. There are a few things I hope to accomplish in the near future. First, I want to plant more native plants, especially Serviceberry, Rocky Mountain Juniper, Oregon Grape, Bitterroot, and Blue Camas. I hope to purchase these plants from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes’ (CSKT) native plant nursery. Second, I hope to install the Séliš-Qlispé Culture Committee’s (SQCC) ethnogeography sign for Níʔaycčstm.¹¹⁴ At the time of this writing, I am in conversation with the SQCC about making this happen. This would contextualize and honor the farm as located in Séliš-Qlispé aboriginal homelands as well as, I hope, contribute to accessibility of and a sense of invitation for Indigenous peoples to be and engage with their homelands. Third, I plan to fulfill my original intention of organizing an event with Aspen and Cameron Decker in the garden, hopefully this summer or early fall.

Finally, a bonus accomplishment! Starting in mid-April of 2023, I was given the opportunity to volunteer on the Bison Range. The Bison Range, which was previously managed entirely by the US federal government, was, in 2022, finally restored to the CSKT for management. This, of course, comes with a long history of injustice which I will not get into here, but I will say that it has been such a meaningful experience to work directly for the CSKT

¹¹² See Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” 13-17: this “can mean the adoption of Indigenous practices and knowledge, but more, refer to those narratives in the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claim to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping. This is a fantasy that is invested in a settler futurity and dependent on the foreclosure of an Indigenous futurity.” See also Paul Guernsey, “Western Environmental Phenomenology as a Colonizing Practice,” 4: “These strategies are intended to nullify the guilt of colonization and project a settler future in which Native people willfully acquiesce to settler supremacy and control of their land.”

¹¹³ See Wes Jackson’s book, *Becoming Native to this Place*, especially pages 14-16 for his discussion of white settler replacement of Indigenous peoples.

¹¹⁴ See this sign on the SQCC’s webpage here: <http://www.csksalish.org/index.php/ethnogeography/missoula-area>

on projects that I know will benefit the Indigenous peoples whose homelands I inhabit. It feels directly in line with the spirit of my project. I have even been able to plant native plants which was one of the things I had hoped to accomplish with my CEP—and I got to plant those native plants within 100 yards from resting bison.

Overall, I am very satisfied with the way my CEP turned out. I am eager to continue this work in the native plant garden—in collaboration with the PEAS farmers, Aspen and Cameron Decker, and the SQCC—through volunteering on the Bison Range, and whatever other opportunities arise for me to continue conceiving and enacting a distinctly Jewish and decolonial relationship with land.

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