

Materiality at the Intersection of Ecology and Religious Studies

Fondazione Giorgio Cini
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
University College Dublin
Harvard Divinity School



Fruit of *Nelumbo nucifera*, Botanischer Garten Linz/Austria @ Iswal

Conference

21 — 23 May 2024



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE
fondazione ONLUS
GIORGIO CINI



Università
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IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
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THE NEW
INSTITUTE

Centre for Environmental
Humanities (NICHE)
at Ca' Foscari
University of Venice

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ITALIAN DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF
RELIGIOUS STUDIES - UNIMORE

The conference is organized jointly by Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities), Ca' Foscari University of Venice (THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities – NICHE, the Center for the Study of Lived Religion, and the Department of Asian and North African Studies), University College Dublin (Irish Research Council Government of Ireland), and Harvard Divinity School (Center for the Study of World Religions).

Tuesday, 21 May 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore

10:00 – 10:30

Welcome greetings

10:30 – 11:30

- **André van der Braak** (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)
“Ayahuasca as Liquid Divinity: The Rise of Ecodealic Religiosity in the West”
- **Nicola Renzi** (University of Bologna / University of Helsinki)
“Don’t You Hear the Spirits Warning Us?” Signals of Extractivism and Ecological Crisis in Sámi Sacred Soundscapes”

11:30 – 12:00

Coffee break

12:00 – 13:00

- **Agnieszka Halemba** (Polish Academy of Sciences)
“Is *Ee* a Spirit?”
- **Damiano Benvegnù** (University of St Andrews)
“Harvest Rare: The Botanical Sacred of Shaker Sister Cora Helena Sarle’s Plant Drawings”

14:30 – 16:00

- **Russell Powell** (Harvard Divinity School)
“Ecology, Poetry, and the Extraordinary: Prospects for Rationality’s Recovery”
- **Sandrine Welte** (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice)
“Max Ernst’s Mythopoeic Ecocriticism: Beyond *Histoire Naturelle*”
- **Charles M. Stang** (Harvard Divinity School)
“Blue Matter, Blue Mind: Water, Consciousness, and the End of Our World”

Wednesday, 22 May 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore

10:00 – 11:30

- **Giuseppe Tateo** (ICUB University of Bucharest)
“Heaven in Concrete: The Infrastructural Expansion of Romanian Orthodox Christianity”
- **Franca Tamisari** (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)
“Connectivity, Co-Becoming and Performance. An Australian Indigenous Ontology, Northeast Arnhem Land Australia”
- **Victor Secco** (University of Manchester / Ca' Foscari University of Venice)
“Gangajal as Ritual Matter: Water as Ritual Infrastructure”

11:30 – 12:00

Coffee break

12:00 – 13:00

- **Anna Sierka** (Tel Aviv University)
“On Animal Intuition, Shame, and Chiasm between Species – Metamorphoses of Baalam’s Donkey”
- **Nouh Anajjar** (University Mohammed Premier, Oujda)
“Eco-Spiritual and Ecocosmopolitan Manifesto. In the Works of Etel Adnan: In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country as a Case Study”

14:30 – 16:00

- **Stuart Young** (Bucknell University)
“Silkworm-Human Relations in Chinese Sericulture Religion”
- **Milinda Banerjee** (University of St Andrews)
“Political Theologies of Multispecies Democracy: Perspectives from the Global South”
- **Alessandra Manzini** (independent researcher)
“Guinean Sacred Forests Social Ecosystems: Territories of Epistemic Resistance”

18:00 – 20:00

Screening of the film *Lagunaria* and discussion with the author at the cinema Giorgione, Cannaregio 4612

Thursday, 23 May 2024

Fondazione Giorgio Cini | Venice, Island of San Giorgio Maggiore
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Ca' Bottacin | Venice, Dorsoduro 3911

10:00 – 11:30

- **Francesca Pietropaolo** (independent art historian, critic, and curator)
“Delcy Morelos: Earthly Heaven”
- **Tara B. M. Smith** (Harvard Divinity School)
“Terraforming Planets in the Works of Kim Stanley Robinson Jr and Frank Herbert”
- **Isacco Turina** (University of Bologna)
“Rilke, Kafka, Čapek: Harbingers of Ontological Anxiety”

Autonomous transportation to **NICHE** (THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities) Ca' Foscari University of Venice - Ca' Bottacin

14:00 – 15:30 At NICHE / Ca' Bottacin

- **Irene Becci** (Université de Lausanne)
“Forms of Ecomaterialism in European Feminism”
- **Benedetta Panisson** (Durham University)
“Queering the Marriage of the Sea”
- **Devin Zuckerman** (University of Virginia)
“Hearing the Voices of the Ḍākinī in the Water: Tibetan Buddhist Elemental Meditations and their Environmental Contexts”

15:30 – 16:00

Coffee break

16:00 – 17:00

Keynote speaker at NICHE

- **Greta Gaard** (University of Wisconsin River Falls) – Discussant **Claudia Dellacasa** (University College Dublin)

17:00 – 17:30

Final remarks of the organizers:

Francesca Tarocco (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Joseph Sanzo (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)

Claudia Dellacasa, (University College Dublin)

Francesco Piraino (Fondazione Giorgio Cini / Harvard Divinity School)

Abstracts

“Eco-Spiritual and Ecocosmopolitan Manifesto. In the Works of Etel Adnan: In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country as a Case Study,” Nouh Anajjar, University Mohammed Premier

This paper delves into the intersection of environmental humanities and migrant literature, specifically exploring the seminal work of Arab-American writer, artist, and philosopher Etel Adnan in her memoir ‘In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country’ (2005). Employing the framework of the Material Turn and the Ecological Turn within Anglophone migrant literature, this study contends that Adnan’s poetics transcend intersubjectivity, propelling toward a post-dualistic and post-anthropocentric paradigm. The argument unfolds within Gayatri Spivak’s Sense of the term ‘Margin’, expanding the discourse on diasporic or marginal literature.

The analysis posits that Adnan’s narrative signifies a broader trajectory of cosmopolitanism, echoing the notion of ‘Ecocosmopolitan’ articulated by Mehnert. This concept underscores the emergence of cross-cultural ecological epistemologies, intertwining the migratory experience with environmental consciousness. Through an eco-critical lens, the paper contends that Adnan’s memoir serves as a harbinger of a double articulation: a decolonial perspective and a call for transnational environmental activism. Her work contributes to eco-imaginaries that re-envision alternative, environmentally sustainable modes of dwelling within the cosmos.

Adnan’s narrative transcends mere human-human coexistence, delving into a profound form of co-being or co-living that encompasses both humans and more-than-human entities. This paper asserts that Adnan fosters a post-humanist co-existence, offering a paradigm shift in understanding the intricate relationships between humanity and the environment.

A key aspect of the analysis involves interpreting Adnan’s memoir through the lens of eco-spirituality. The memoir, viewed as a representation of the aesthetic sublime, intricately weaves together beauty and terror, pain and pleasure. Adnan’s work is posited as profoundly imbued with the tension, conflicts, and paradoxes inherent in life, death, pleasure, and uncertainty. This study argues that Adnan’s reflective prose serves as a poignant reflection on reality, urging readers to confront the complexities of existence in an era marked by ecological crises.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the growing body of scholarship in environmental humanities and migrant literature, offering a nuanced understanding of Etel Adnan’s contribution to the development of eco-cosmopolitan aesthetics. The exploration of Adnan’s eco-spiritual narrative unveils the potential for transformative environmental activism and invites readers to reconsider their relationship with the natural world.

“Political Theologies of Multispecies Democracy: Perspectives from the Global South,” Milinda Banerjee, University of St Andrews

This paper builds on my earlier work, co-authored with Jelle Wouters, *Subaltern Studies 2.0: Being against the Capitalocene* (Chicago, 2022), and our current book project on multispecies democracy. I draw on Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim cosmologies from India, investigating (in the original language) ancient Sanskrit and Pali texts like the *Vedas*, the *Jatakas*, and *Panchatantra*, early modern Muslim-influenced vernacular Hindi and Bengali traditions like Kabir’s poetry and the *Raymangal*, as well as nineteenth-twentieth century anticolonial Indian nationalist writings. I argue that over the past three millennia, India has produced sophisticated political theologies reflecting on political and social organization among animals, and, to a lesser extent, among plants. Many of these texts argued that animals (less often, plants) live in democratic collectives and even engage in social contracts between themselves and with human beings in order to limit mutual violence. I contextualize these texts within histories of state formation, commercialization, ecological transformation, and inter-species conflicts in South Asia, from the first millennium BCE to the colonial and postcolonial eras. I then juxtapose these materials with ethnography done in Bhutan. I show how Indian-origin Buddhist religious norms shape subaltern lifeworlds in Bhutan. We can thus relate textualized cosmologies to actual multispecies political theologies still in practice among herders and monks in the Himalayan kingdom today.

Subsequently, I connect this textual and ethnographic research to perspectives on political

ontology from Latin America. I read translations of sixteenth-seventeenth century Indigenous texts such as the Mayan epic *Popol Vuh* and the *Andean Huarochiri* manuscript alongside observations of multispecies ethnographers like Marisol de la Cadena, Arturo Escobar, and Thom van Dooren. On this basis, I argue that religious traditions from the Global South offer us radical political resources to think about animals and other nonhuman beings as properly political actors.

Finally, drawing on Ranajit Guha and the wider Subaltern Studies Collective, I argue that recognizing animals and other nonhuman beings as political, rather than prepolitical, actors, is an important first step towards the creation of multispecies communities, indeed multispecies democracies. In such polities, nonhuman species are recognized as fellow citizens and comrades, rather than as mere objects of commodification and value-extraction. Norms can thus be evolved to regulate violence against animals and other nonhuman beings, and indeed to protect their social being. I am, of course, inspired here by Sue Donaldson and William Kymlicka's work *Zoopolis*. However, I argue that political theorists and activists need to seriously engage with religion today, much more than they have done before, if they are to create enduring responses to the climate crisis and mass extinction of species. Religious texts and practices, especially as instantiated by subaltern actors, offer us powerful resources to critique neoliberal capitalism and the unbridled commodification of nonhuman beings, which have led to the crisis of the Anthropocene/ Capitalocene. My overall argument is: by engaging with religion and cosmology, radical political actors can work in partnership with subaltern/Indigenous communities in the Global South in the pursuit of human and nonhuman wellbeing.

“Forms of Ecomaterialism in European Feminism,” Irene Becci, Université de Lausanne

This contribution proposes a reflexion on the ways in which the current of militant thought and action known as ecofeminism entangles interconnected human and more-than-human agencies and discourses. Starting with a presentation of how the observed ecofeminist activists in Switzerland, France and Italy combine ecological and feminist knowledge, approaches and demands, it offers an insight into how affectivity, emotions and spirituality are transformed into a subjective mystical experience linked to the exploitation of natural resources.

The term ecofeminism appeared in the 1970s with the writings of Françoise d'Eaubonne, an iconoclastic figure at the crossroads of feminist activism, radical ecology and libertarian thought. She identified a common imaginary justifying the destruction of nature and patriarchal social order that exploits women. By calling for these struggles to converge, she hoped to strengthen solidarity in opposition to the depletion of resources and increasing pollution by Western societies, in the context of the Cold War. These convergences began to emerge initially in Anglo-Saxon countries, where a range of movements and theories related to ecofeminism developed in a plural and heterogeneous way, including spiritual strands. Despite its heterogeneity, this movement with its flexible contours has a number of common characteristics, such as the primacy given to experience, the call to cultivate one's interiority and care for one's body, optimism about the possibilities of living in harmony with nature, and the emphasis placed on the notion of healing, often with a spiritual or even magical side. An ecofeminist turn began to take hold in the world of French-speaking European eco-activism in 2015.

“Harvest Rare: The Botanical Sacred of Shaker Sister Cora Helena Sarle's Plant Drawings,” Damiano Benvegnù, University of St Andrews

The Canterbury Shaker Village was established in 1792 when followers of Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, formed their seventh community in Canterbury, NH (USA). As the other members of *The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing*, they, too, believed in communal ownership, pacifism, dancing in worship, equality of the sexes, celibacy, and living simply. Cora Helena Sarle joined the Canterbury Shaker Village 90 years later, at the age of 15. Due to her fragile health, she was encouraged by her Elders to spend time outdoors and keep a plant journal, drawing all the wild botanical specimens growing in the surrounding fields. Between 1886 and 1887, Sister Sarle completed two notebooks of watercolor drawings that were subsequently used to teach the Canterbury community about useful native plants and the beauty of God's creation.

My research investigates the plants drawn by Sister Sarle not as a mere nineteenth century pedagogical device, but rather as participants in the same fascination for the botanical world displayed by the spiritual trees of life painted by other Shaker visionary women artists during

the so-called Era of Manifestation (ca. 1837-1855). Sister Sarle's delicate and yet accurate images function in fact as implicit representations of the Shakers' understanding of their relationship with both the environment and the divinity; their unassuming and yet undeniable intensity as a wondrously simple map of the potential harmony between this world and the next. Furthermore, they provide us with an invaluable inventory for determining the changes in flora biodiversity in the last 150 years. My paper thus engages the doubly intertwined meaning of these quite unexplored plant drawings: at once a botanical act of devotion to God and a record of an alternative, perhaps less destructive, multispecies interaction.

“Ayahuasca as Liquid Divinity: The Rise of Ecodelic Religiosity in the West,” André van der Braak, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

As ceremonies involving the Amazonian psychoactive ayahuasca tea travel to the West, they contribute to new religious forms that go by the name of *ecodelic* religiosity: they aim to bring to light and embody our inherent embeddedness in ecological systems. The Australian religion scholar Bron Taylor has called such new forms *dark green religion* (Taylor 2010).

Ayahuasca often yields transformative experiences that merge such familiar categories as the sacred and the secular, transcendence and immanence, subject and object, and the human and the nonhuman. However, Western discourses on ayahuasca religiosity such as “psychedelic mysticism” and “entheogenic shamanism” are influenced by what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has called “the immanent frame”: the seemingly self-evident secular context that underlies Western worldviews (Taylor 2008). There is a gap between such Western discourses and indigenous discourses on ayahuasca that requires new cross-cultural and decolonized approaches.

This paper explores the thought of French philosopher Bruno Latour, asking fundamental ontological questions in order to reimagine ayahuasca religiosity (see van der Braak 2023). It will propose a new and integrative “entangled” discourse on ayahuasca that shifts the focus from ayahuasca experiences to ayahuasca-based contemplative practices. It will use this entangled discourse on ayahuasca to discuss ayahuasca religiosity in the West, approaching it as part of what Latour advocates, in his book *Facing Gaia* (Latour 2017) as a “Gaian religiosity that focuses on ritual practices aimed at cultivating relationships with more-than-human powers, rather than as merely a collection of creedal beliefs in “supernatural beings.”

Such ecodelic Gaian religiosity can be found in the ritual practices of the Brazilian Santo Daime church, in which ayahuasca plays a central role as a sacrament that embodies the divine (“liquid divinity”). Santo Daime practices aim at what anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann has described as “kindling the presence of invisible others,” and cultivating the ability to communicate and work together with more-than-human beings.

“Material Roots and Resonances for Ecofeminist Spiritualities,” Greta Gaard, University of Wisconsin River Falls

Saints, spiritual practitioners, indigenous communities, poets and devotees of many faith traditions have experienced a divine presence emanating and animating throughout all earth's life forms—from plants and insects, humans and other animals, sky and sea and waterbodies, minerals and soil. This presentation brings a material ecofeminist perspective to intersections of ecospiritualities across traditions of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Placing the writings and stories of St. Francis, the early Buddhist nuns, Sufi and EcoDharma practitioners in conversation with “nature” poetry and indigenous North American plant studies, this presentation re-stories a meeting-place for intersectional, material, and feminist earth-based spiritualities.

“Is ee a spirit?”, Agnieszka Halemba, Polish Academy of Sciences

One of the most common ways of writing about the religious life of the people of Inner Asia, present both in the scholarly literature on the subject and in literary texts, is the narrative of the guardian spirits of places. It is used by scholars for whom the local languages are their mother tongues, by Russian-speaking scholars and by those who use English or other languages in their scholarly work.

In the case of Altai, the most important concept translated in this way is the one of *Altaiᠳᠢᠶ᠋ᠩᠡᠵᠢ*. The structure of this translation is uniform, regardless of language: to Altai - understood as a natural material object - belongs a spiritual entity, thanks to which mountains, springs, mountain

passes and rivers are alive and interact with people. Thanks to the existence of this entity, Altai becomes a living organism that feels, interacts, punishes inappropriate behaviour or unites those who are in relationship with it.

But does this translation really capture the way the inhabitants of Altai build relationships with nature and the land? I suggest that we might better grasp the way in which people interact with nature if we understand *eezi* as a quality or characteristic of a being, regardless of its classification as material or non-material within non-Altaiian (Christian, Western) ontological schemes. *Ee* signifies not a “spirit” which is added to materiality but a potential for entering into a meaningful relationship that presupposes but also creates assemblages as seats of agency.

This approach has consequences for understanding the ways in which nature protection initiatives are understood and evaluated by local people. This presentation is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Republic of Altai (Russian Federation) between 1993 and 2008.

“Guinean Sacred Forests Social Ecosystems: Territories of Epistemic Resistance,” Alessandra Manzini, independent researcher

Sacred Forests (SFs) are places holding special importance for societies entwined with them. Often located in some of the world’s most biodiversity hotspots, they feature a high conservation value. SFs are complex and unique ecosystems deeply intertwined with traditional beliefs, key historical events, and burial practices. Drawing upon my doctoral research carried out in the Guinean forest hotspot within the Diola territories of Lower Casamance (Senegal), this paper discusses how the Social-Ecological Systems (SES) of SFs encourages endogenous epistemic resistance rooted in Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Sacralization of nature and equal relations between human, non-human and more-than-human led by religious ecological practices is one of the levers of SES’s resilience. In the epistemological and ontological realm of cosmo-vision, a fundamental relationship exists between the imagery that people develop about origin of cosmos, and tangible implications in livelihood practices such as fishing, farming, utilizing trees, organizing political community, using collective resources, and growing a values system around the cultivation of rice with rain. The cosmology of Diola envisages a strong interaction between human and more-than-human in sacred forests, rain-fed rice paddies, and mangroves-dunes ecosystems: they are all considered sacred places. The SF’s SES foster peasant resistance strategies against the extractive industry, via intergenerational transmission of TEK and social norms, particularly regarding land access. The paper dives into peasant resistance movements of Lower Casamance, acknowledging the existence of a relationship between human and more-than-human able to defend ancestral lands against the dominant myth of growth and accumulation.

“Queering the Marriage of the Sea,” Benedetta Panisson, Durham University

In 1000 the doge of Venice, Pietro II Orseolo, married the sea. The union took place at the port mouth of S. Nicolò. He was clad in ermine and with a horn on his head; he slowly paraded aboard the Bucintoro, to such an extent barded with gold statues that it became an object unfit for navigation. Blessed water was poured into the water, a ring was thrown into the waves. *Desposamus te, mare. In signum veri perpetuique dominii*, the formula says. The ceremony was made sacred by Pope Alexander III in 1173 with the words, *Doge of Venice, this is the wedding ring of your marriage to the sea. From now on, we want you and your successors to marry her every year.* The doge is a male, therefore, the sea a female. The ceremony, for centuries, represented a spiritual gesture of mutual protection: the male doge by taming her, the female sea by promising not to provoke unfavorable storms. The political and economic value of dominance over the seas, which the Serenissima particularly cared about, was also stated. Both the gender issue and the fact that domination of one subject over another can be acted out through marriage in a patriarchal form, in this case between human and waterscape, remain irrelevant details. In light of international and legal acknowledgements, such as the Tiwi Island case, analyzed by Veronica Strang, where native people declared that Santos company drilling could spiritually and ecologically destabilize the entire island community, leaves us to ponder the question: if spirituality still values to protect an ecological system, and whether this intersects some form of genderization of the aquatic environment, the concept of ownership, as Strang herself points out, *it suggests that the material qualities water elude such conceptual fixity, and enable – indeed necessitate – more fluid forms of ownership.* My paper focuses precisely on this proposal of fluidity to be intertwined with the question of gender, when this is attributed to a sea, as in the case of the Venetian marriage of the sea.

“Delcy Morelos: Earthly Heaven,” Francesca Pietropaolo, independent art historian, critic, and curator

Colombian artist Delcy Morelos (b.1967) creates art that calls attention to the rich interconnections between humanity and the environment. Based in Bogotá, since the 1990s she has produced a multimedia body of work in which the natural and the sacred mingle. In her recent installations she employs soil as raw material, inviting us to wander in carefully crafted spaces that stimulate our senses. Drawing on the cosmologies of ancestral cultures, such as the Andean and Amazonian ones as well as her own cosmology, Morelos’s work highlights the fundamental power of mud as a source of life and sustenance. The artist conceives Earth as a feminine divinity holding in its womb the cycles of life, death, and rebirth. Furthermore, Morelos often reflects on land use and ownership in her country as well as on Colombia’s prolonged and violent history of conflict and displacement. In that respect, her work invites us to consider earth as a living entity rather than a territory to be owned. This study aims to highlight and analyze Morelos’s spiritual and ecological beliefs in interconnectivity, reciprocity, and respect between all living things opening new lines of inquiry on the relationship between art and nature in contemporary culture and in the face of the current environmental crisis. This paper will explore the ways in which Morelos’s installation art bridges culture and nature, materiality and spirituality in innovative ways. In particular, the analysis will focus on two immersive, multisensory installations, *Cielo terrenal* (Earthly Heaven, 2023) and *El abrazo* (The Embrace, 2023), in which surface and volume converge and collapse through monochromatic expanse and material accumulation. This paper intends to explore how Morelos reorients considerations of land and site toward embodied forms of material, ecological, and spiritual knowledge. As the artist has underscored, to her the feminine “refers to a structure and a way of engaging with the world from certain specific interests: listening, nourishing, caring, the unconscious, harmony, connectivity, emotion, knowledge acquired from instinct and bodily experience. This feminine approach can be cultivated by any gender as it is, in my view, a human tendency and, furthermore, a vital one.”

“Ecology, Poetry, and the Extraordinary: Prospects for Rationality’s Recovery,” Russell Powell, Harvard Divinity School

Enlightenment rationality has long been appraised as a not-so-furtive tool of colonial reason. When what counts as “rational” expresses the interests of who *produces* rationality (namely, Euro-American hegemonic powers), “knowledge” is never as innocent as it seems. The wide acceptance of the idea that the rational articulates its relation to subaltern others through hegemonic vocabularies proscribes discussion of “rationality” ever playing a positive role in political approaches to contemporary ecological dilemmas like climate change. Indeed, when ordinary language is thought to reify the logic of predominant ideology, as Adorno claimed, our very *words* cannot be trusted to communicate a view of human-nature relationality that is free of domination. While experiences of the extraordinary in nature have traditionally been employed to develop a metaphysics of presence (as in, nondiscursive claims to access the world’s inherent reality), this paper will explore the role extraordinary experience serves to elicit a politically potent sense of *uncertainty*. Uncertainty, I will argue, is generative of novel cognitive forms, innovative ways of thinking, of conceiving of ourselves and our futures; new ways, that is, of *wording* the world such as what poetry promotes. The uncertainty that is characteristic of experiences of the extraordinary indeed serves to disrupt and remake what counts as “rational” with new conceptual considerations, new descriptions, new claims conducive to enacting more ecologically benign ways of dwelling on Earth. Marginalized and discredited ecological ways of knowing—Indigenous lifeways, Black religions such as what are found in Afro-Caribbean cultures, animistic traditions in Meso- and South America—are especially adept at unsettling rationality’s colonialist norms given their alternative figuring of humans’ material relations. To this end, this paper will seek to make contributions to debates in religion and ecology over the ecological efficacy of counter epistemologies and their bearing on reason-giving practice in contemporary environmental politics.

“‘Don’t You Hear the Spirits Warning Us?’ Signals of Extractivism and Ecological Crisis in Sámi Sacred Soundscapes,” Nicola Renzi, University of Bologna, University of Helsinki

According to the traditional belief system of the Sámi people, every corner of their Indigenous territory in the European Arctic is inhabited and traversed by a diverse multitude of more-than-

human spirits which, since time immemorial, actively tend to this ancestral land, meticulously regulating the fragile ecosystemic relations among all its inhabitants. Beside the customary practice of material offerings, the Sámi mainly encounter these entities within the sonic realm, engaging with them through environmental listening, *joik* performances and percussive divinations on ceremonial drums. Based on interviews and ecoacoustic recordings carried out during ethnographic fieldwork, this paper examines these *hierophonies* – sacred components of a soundscape – to draw attention to their ecological implications. Adopting biocultural and post-colonial approaches capable of challenging nature-culture dichotomies that hold no relevance within Sámi onto-epistemologies, the study places specific emphasis on symbolic reinterpretations of forms and values in human-spirit communication during times of environmental catastrophe. The relentless colonial extraction of natural resources and the resulting depletion of Sámi biocultural landscape emerge as novel *topoi* in both the material and immaterial expressions of Sámi spirituality. Two representative cases support the analysis of these transformations: (1) vocal interactions with spirits through the echoing of sacred sites where the acoustic environment has been disrupted by colonial extractivism, and (2) the iconographic translation of the ecological crisis portrayed as cognitive map on the membrane of a Sámi ceremonial drum. Driven by the same oracular question – “what will the spirits tell us about the events to come?” – through which the Sámi traditionally consult their spirits, both cases converge to highlight ways in which the Sámi interpret contemporary global challenges within a local cosmological and ecological horizon, negotiating ancestral knowledge and incorporating modernity into a shared interpretative framework which ensures and entrusts an effective transmission of spiritual and ecological knowledge in a challenging present.

“Gangajal as Ritual Matter: Water as Ritual Infrastructure,” Victor Secco, University of Manchester, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

The waters of the Ganges River are of key importance in the Indian subcontinent. Not only do they provide subsistence to the almost half a million people that live in its basin, but the waters also play a significant role in Hindu rituals, traveling beyond the gangetic plains into temples and people’s houses and bodies.

Based on fieldwork carried out in Varanasi between 2019 and 2020, I propose to look at *gangajal*—holy Ganges water—as a substance key to Hindu rituals despite its not always visible roles. I analyse everyday temple rituals in Varanasi to explore the role of water considering the implications in relation to the literature on materiality of water. I suggest a close consideration of water as a mediation matter can contribute illuminating significant connections that tie humans and their landscapes in an age of intense anthropogenic changes and support a reframing of water as ritual material in Hindu practices.

“On Animal Intuition, Shame, and Chiasm between Species – Metamorphoses of Baalam’s Donkey,” Anna Sierka, Tel Aviv University

In Hebrew, the written word for donkey (*hamor*) resembles the noun *homer* (matter), which kabbalists have interpreted as a synonym indicating the absence of subtle qualities. It may come as no surprise that Jewish interpreters associated this animal with the lowest instincts mirrored in the region of the soul viewed as an animal soul – self-centeredness and voluptuousness. The paper aims to delve into transformations of the female donkey within medieval Jewish mystical treatises (especially in Abraham Abulafia’s ecstatic kabbalah and in the *Zohar*) exposing its ambiguous status existing at the nexus between animal and demonic creatures. By deploying Catherine Malabou’s concept of plasticity as a tool to explore the metamorphoses of ontological belongingness of both the donkey and her owner Baalam, together with notions of trans-animality underpinned by Derrida’s *animalséance* (an “original experience of the impropriety” or rather, man’s shame of being ashamed when facing an animal being), I wish to ruminate on the particularities of animal aesthesis and exceptional sensitization of Baalam’s donkey to stimuli imperceptible to the sorcerer himself. Moreover, I will focus on the oddness of the *zoharic* exposition of the genesis mythos including the creation of three mouths, that of the earth, that of the female donkey and that of a well, at the twilight of Shabbat eve, which posits the donkey’s mouth to be sealed within a great abyss. The animal’s muteness (*Stummheit*) is only considered such by humans, thus Balaam remains unaware that God has opened the female donkey’s mouth in order to announce an angelic messenger, such that the female donkey becomes capable of speaking as birds uttering divine decrees. In the framework of my contemplation on eco-sophy, viewed as a vital component of theosophy, the question of lost sensualities and the missing link between the animal and the human must be addressed.

“Terraforming Planets in the Works of Kim Stanley Robinson Jr and Frank Herbert,” Tara B. M. Smith, Harvard Divinity School

This paper explores the themes of hiking, zen buddhism and environmentalism in the science fiction works of Frank Herbert and Kim Stanley Robinson Jr. In addition, the biographical information on the two key writers of climate change fiction will be unpacked simultaneously. Both Herbert’s book *Dune* (1965) and *The Green Brain* (1966) promote ecological beliefs inspired by Herbert’s own experiences walking, hiking and spending time on the American west coast. Similarly, Robinson explores in his own fiction the awe of nature in his *Mars* trilogy (1992-1999) as well as themes of Buddhism and the preservation of nature. Just as Herbert was inspired by the natural environment of Oregon, Robinson draws on his time hiking in the Sierra Nevadas since the 1970s in his work. Robinson’s new work *High Sierra: A Love Story* (2022) describes his radical transformation experience while hiking. Herbert’s original idea for *Dune* was inspired by a non-fiction article in 1957 to write about the sand dunes of Florence, Oregon. In his research, he photographed, hiked and experienced the Oregon coast-line in detail, delving deeper into the ecology of the area. For both writers, the fictional worlds are used to critique the destruction and modification of the natural environment and instead promote an individual spirituality inspired heavily by Zen Buddhist beliefs of a middle path and interconnectedness. Using examples from both their biographical interviews and experiences as well as their works of fiction, this article will argue that both writers are part of a larger religious and ecological context inspired by the natural environment of West Coast America as well as their own personal beliefs informed and inspired by Buddhist traditions.

“Blue Matter, Blue Mind: Water, Consciousness, and the End of Our World,” Charles M. Stang, Harvard Divinity School

In *Seven Brief Lessons in Physics*, contemporary physicist Carlo Rovelli appeals to water as a metaphor to explain both the general theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, the two dominant but incommensurate paradigms in modern physics. In *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, philosopher Emanuele Coccia insists that immersion is the condition of all life on earth, and that the fish is the paradigm of life because it takes into itself what is all around it – water. For both of these Italian thinkers, the pre-Socratic philosophers serve as a source of inspiration: for Rovelli, it is Anaximander; for Coccia, Anaximenes. However, one very early pre-Socratic philosopher is conspicuously absent in both: Thales of Miletus, who famously remarked that “everything is water.” This paper will attempt to plumb the depths of these appeals to water, which straddle science and philosophy, poetry and religion. Why is the elemental thinking of the pre-Socratics, specifically around water, bubbling up in these strangely apposite thinkers? If time permits, I will put this tradition into conversation with another from antiquity: the ascetical and mystical theology of Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399), a Christian philosopher and monk who, although he spent his final years in the deserts of Egypt, reported that at the height of the contemplation of the divine, the monk’s mind experienced itself as, of all things, *blue*. He also speculated that before the sin that necessitated the creation of the world as we know it, and after when that sin is healed and the world comes to its end, we were (and will be again) minds that existed, paradoxically, like rivers in a sea that had no land. In other words, what it means to be a mind is to be a slip or stream of water in a world of water, to be in some mysterious way a mobile individual in an unindividuated and ever-moving divine medium. The aim will be to sketch a picture of “blue matter” and “blue mind,” of consciousness as water, or water as consciousness, and how it bears on the end of our world—end understood as both the close, and more importantly the goal.

“Connectivity, Co-Becoming and Performance. An Australian Indigenous Ontology, Northeast Arnhem Land Australia,” Franca Tamisari, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

In reference to the ethnographic work I have been carrying out in an Australian Indigenous community in Northeast Arnhem Land since 1990, I explore how ‘everything is linked to one another’ in Indigenous Yolngu “ontology of connectivity” (Rose 1999, 2017: 495): how landscape feature, person, name, animal, plant or natural phenomenon participate in each other by entrapping multiple, ramified, and interconnected agencies, which are thus distributed in beings, objects and events in the past and across the present. This unfixed, ‘distributed agency’ (Gell 1998), a ‘nonlinear enfolding of spacetime mattering’ (Barad 2010: 244) is conveyed in the Yolngu image of the footprint (djalkiri) expressing at once many aspects of connectivity, such as consubstantiality,

identification, sequence and trajectory, similarity and difference, inside and outside in metaphors, names, stories and ways of behaving, as well as natural features, plants, images of strings, flows, traces and tracks in everyday and ritual life.

**“Heaven in Concrete: The Infrastructural Expansion of Romanian Orthodox Christianity,”
Giuseppe Tateo, ICUB University of Bucharest**

Since 1990, the Romanian Orthodox Church has built one cathedral per year, dozens of monasteries, and a new church every three days. This industry heavily relies on concrete, an enormous source of greenhouse gases fueling global climate change. Bucharest’s newly built national cathedral, for example, required up to 100,000 cubic metres of concrete, the same amount as ten ten-storey buildings. It is through a theologically engaged anthropology (Lemons 2018) that I shall tackle the tensions between the development of religious infrastructure and Christian-Orthodox cosmologies, but also those between the right to religious freedom and the instrumental usage of public Orthodoxy to gain political legitimacy.

This paper delves into Orthodox perspectives on nature and the built environment to understand to what extent such a hectic construction industry is sanctioned on a theological level. It combines ethnographic data with the theology of St Maximus the Confessor (580-662), who set the ground for the early Christian understanding of nature. The latter, which coincides with the ‘cosmos’ or creation, has an inherent value by virtue of having been created by God but also being subject to the synergetic action of God and man. Romanian monasteries are experiencing considerable growth in terms of new construction projects and flows of pilgrims and capital. This leads to an apparent paradox: the contemporary infrastructural expansion seems to be at odds with notions of renunciation, quiet, and modesty – all definitional aspects of (Orthodox) monasticism.

“Rilke, Kafka, Čapek: Harbingers of Ontological Anxiety,” Isacco Turina, University of Bologna

Post-human studies routinely accuse “the modern West” of thoroughly separating human and non-human worlds. While undoubtedly there is ground for such allegations against the political, religious, and scientific mainstream, arts and literature tell a different story. In particular, European literature has explored alternative ontologies long before the social sciences embraced this paradigm in the 1990s. As a case study, I will analyze some works by the three prominent Prague writers of the beginning of the twentieth century: Rilke, Kafka, and Čapek. I aim to show that each of them has radically challenged the boundaries of the human in prose, poetry, and drama.

First, I will focus on some of Kafka’s short stories where the frontier of humans and animals appears to be permeable. I will turn then to Rilke’s *Elegies of Duino*, with their anxious questions about the place of humans among other creatures (angels, plants, things, animals, the dead). Finally, I will engage Čapek’s play *R.U.R.*, which first introduces the term “robot” and imagines a global takeover of the machines. Before ecological awareness emerged in the second half of the century, these and other authors paved the way for new and alternative visions of the interrelation and mutual exchange between humans and non-humans in a world rapidly losing its traditional ontological certainty.

“Max Ernst’s Mythopoeic Ecocriticism: Beyond *Histoire Naturelle*,” Sandrine Welte, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice

Among all the surrealists, it was perhaps Max Ernst, who most fervently embraced André Breton’s paradigm of the unspeakable nature of flora and fauna. As a pioneer of the movement, his paintings establish a new vision of coexistence between different forms of life, by ruling out a rigid classification from an anthropocentrism as *tertium comparationis*. Fascinated by the forest since his early childhood, Max Ernst refers to nature in his painted as well as sculpted work. His world, by this, is born from a very personal mythology where human beings and animals live in symbiosis. The presence of his avian alter ego “Loplop” dates from the 1920s, and coincides with the creation of the 34 folios of *Histoire Naturelle*. In this compilation of individual drawings made through the use of his ‘frottage’ technique, Max Ernst sought to propose a narrative of creation that differs from that of the Bible to illustrate an alternative account of an equal co-existence and interconnectedness, shared between the different actors that populate the stage of life. Throughout

his prolific career, the German painter worked in cycles, with the aim of formulating a cosmology guided by the ethos of analogy (“as above so below”). This *modus operandi* particularly formed the heart of the canvases executed in the early 1930s, a phase of great creativity. By isolating the constituent elements of one series and integrating them into another, he created links and meta-dialogues between his compositions, weaving an increasingly dense pattern of references. From *The Nymph Echo to The Joy of Living*, Max Ernst crafted a universe of coexistence where the protagonists emerge as the emblem of a connected world. By tracing the narrative of mutual entanglement that rests at the heart of Max Ernst’s art, the paper attempts a re-evaluation of his work from an ecological point of view by highlighting the creative force of paintings that speak of a cosmology of interconnectedness beyond man at the centre of the cosmos. In so doing, it shall be seen how ecocriticism can act as a material(ity) in the arts to rethink humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human worlds as the creative gesture lends visual shape to the otherwise invisible to spark a dialogue that operates qua imagery by virtue of a re-*present*-ation of the spiritual.

“Silkworm-Human Relations in Chinese Sericulture Religion,” Stuart Young, Bucknell University

This paper makes a case for treating premodern Chinese religions like silk, as made by earth, stars, human, and nonhuman beings together. Chinese religious rituals, divine pantheons, texts and icons, behavioral codes, doctrinal ideals and discourses, all emerged, developed, and operated only within and through constitutional entanglements among all manner of (non)human entities and energies. Extant textual and archaeological sources preserve not only human authorial voices but also nonhuman actions and intentions that deeply influenced what humans could think, do, or become. This paper focuses on one such text from the Daoist canon that modern scholars have yet to explore. This is the *Scripture on Sericulture and Agriculture Spoken by the Most High Heavenly Worthy of Numinous Treasure*, which likely circulated among Heavenly Master communities in southern China as early as the twelfth century. This text is notable for preserving some of the most elaborate ritual and ethical prescriptions on record for protecting silkworms and ensuring abundant silk crops. But for silkworms to flourish through this Daoist protectorate also meant for silkworms to boil in the cauldrons of human sericulture industry. Silkworms grew strong only if their human keepers maintained ethical precepts that permitted them to kill silkworms.

Many rituals were devised in premodern China to request and offer thanks for divine gifts of fecund silkworm bodies, rituals that per force coalesced around the contours of actual silkworm lifeworlds. Silk and silkworms were Chinese environmental agents, dictating the seasonal rhythms and material wellbeing of imperial regimes and domestic households. With timely hatching, molting, devouring of mulberry leaves, spinning silk and cocooning their bodies for metamorphosis or human consumption, all in accordance with cyclical phases of natural environments, the lives, products, and deaths of silkworms also transformed Chinese religions. Understood thus as a product of transspecies relations, the Daoist *Scripture on Sericulture and Agriculture* compellingly illustrates the deep entanglements of silk and silkworms within Chinese more-than-human articulations of moral responsibility, recompense, and kinship, and practices of engaging otherworldly powers of good and evil.

“Hearing the Voices of the Ḍākini in the Water: Tibetan Buddhist Elemental Meditations and their Environmental Contexts,” Devin Zuckerman, University of Virginia

This paper explores the multi-faceted role of the primary elements—earth, water, fire, and wind—within foundational scriptures belonging to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition known as the Great Perfection (*Rdzogs chen*). While the elements are widely known within Buddhist material philosophies as units of matter, this research explores lesser-known contexts in which the elements function as objects of meditation, and as vehicles for ordering knowledge about practitioners’ lives and their surrounding environments. I explore these ideas within the 11th-12th century canon of Great Perfection scriptures known as *The Seventeen Tantras* (*Rgyud bcu bdun*).

Central to this exploration is a system of contemplative practice known as “the yogas of the four sounds [of the elements]” (*sgra bzhi nal byor*). These practices entail training not only on the elements’ sounds, but also on their forms, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, in order to bring about distinctly cosmological and ecological forms of religious experience. One of these is the development of the supersensory ability to comprehend the voices of beings in other cosmological realms—such as gods, animals, and other transdimensional inhabitants of the land, water, and air. Thus, through the immediacy of the senses, the practitioner becomes intimately connected to those in the vaster *more-than-human* social environment.

These practices also exist within broader elemental-contemplative theoretical contexts consisting of elemental philosophies, cosmologies, and divinatory practices. The texts' system of astrology, called "elemental calculation" (*byung rtsi*), enables practitioners to tailor these contemplative practices according to the details of their internal elemental physiology, combined with variables such as time and season, in order to actualize both spiritual and medicinal-therapeutic goals. Together, these discourses function to explain and affirm the material interconnections between the body's interior and the surrounding material and cosmological environments. They depict a dynamically changing material universe in which inner and outer worlds interpenetrate, conflict, and harmonize—affecting both human health and contemplative achievement. Thus, drawing on these examples, this paper reflects on the role of elements in Buddhist theories of meditation and the ordering of Buddhist lives.