Ecological Encounter
On Inhabitance and Transforming How We Know
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In her collection of essays, *Belonging*, bell hooks traces the long and winding story of her committed and complicated relationship to her home place in the hills of Kentucky. Having “escaped” rural Appalachia and its persistent racial and economic struggles, hooks finds herself longing to return to the place that “formed the ground of my being.” Fleeing Kentucky had made possible a cosmopolitan academic life in places like the bay area of California and New York City. In each new place, ecological encounters invoke both her longing for Kentucky and a sense of wonder:

> Just as I found solace in nature in Kentucky, the natural environment, trees, grass, plants, the sky in Palo Alto, California, all offered me a place of solace. Digging in the California ground my hands touched earth that was so different from the moist red and brown dirt of Kentucky I felt awe. Wonder permeated my senses as I pondered the fact that traveling thousands of miles away from my native place had actually changed the ground under my feet.1

At the end of his essay, “A Native Hill,” hooks’ Kentucky neighbor Wendell Berry recounts another kind of ecological encounter, lying down on a soft bed of leaves in the woods after a long walk near his home in upland Kentucky. He imagines himself dying there, his flesh slowly joining the humus below him, weaving his body with together the body of the earth:

> And now a leaf, spiraling down in wild flight, lands on my shirt at about the third button below the collar. ...(S)uddenly, I apprehend in it the dark proposal of the ground. Under the fallen leaf my breastbone burns with imminent decay. Other leaves fall. My body begins its long shudder into the humus. I feel my substance escape me, carried into the mold by beetles and worms. Days, winds, seasons pass over me as I sink under the leaves. For a time only sight is left me, a passive awareness of the sky overhead, birds crossing, the mazed interreaching of the treetops, the leaves falling – and then, that, too, sinks away. It is acceptable to me, and I am at peace.

> When I move to go, it is as though I rise up out of the world.2

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Both of these stories demonstrate in sharp relief the ways in which a human being’s self-understanding and very life is transformed in embodied confrontation with non-human life. Both hooks and Berry are changed, their perspectives expanded and deepened, by such authentic and unguarded encounters. These are profoundly ecological encounters.

In this paper, I explore the pedagogical and epistemological significance of ecological encounters. In a larger project, I develop the purpose, theological and theoretical foundations, and educational practices for ecological religious education. This paper seeks to work out a somewhat complicated theoretical question that grounds that project: What does it mean to know, ecologically? And how do ecological encounters change what and how we know?

**Ecological Encounters**

An encounter is a meeting between subjects, sometimes fleeting and often accompanied by a measure of mystery or unknowability. One subject meets another, and recognizes a fundamental difference between the self and the Other. This recognition of difference and mystery might serve to re-inscribe estrangement between the two subjects. Or, when embraced with openness and curiosity, the recognition of difference might invite the participants in the encounter into a relationship of mutual discovery and influence. Our call for papers describes an encounter as “simply a meeting between persons. In the context of religious education, an encounter is a meeting between persons of different religions and faiths in dialogical openness and relationship. ...(A)n encounter can be real life religious education with two complementary learnings: learning self and other.”
What is envisioned here is a particular kind of encounter – inter-religious – between humans. I want to stretch this concept of encounter, however, to include encounters between humans and non-human living things,\textsuperscript{3} drawing on the work of Friedrich Schweitzer, who argues that

\textit{(e)ven when what is encountered is not a concrete person but, for example, a different culture or religion, encounter at least refers to the immediacy of personal involvement. I cannot encounter another person or entity without allowing myself to be influenced, affected or even altered by the encounter. Moreover, encounter implies that the outcome of this process of being affected or altered cannot be predicted or predefined. Encounter requires openness and availability – making oneself available to others. This is what makes encounter risky and fascinating at the same time.}\textsuperscript{4}

Schweitzer’s description makes clear the transformative potential of ecological encounters. When engaged with openness and availability, they summon embodied, affective, and imaginative human capacities. Ecological encounters like the ones described above by Berry and hooks bear within them the “immediacy of personal involvement.” They are immediate because the encounter with nature is unmediated and embodied. They are personal because they have a profound impact on the person’s self-understanding. And they are involved because they reveal the ways in which human life is interconnected, woven together with, our ecological contexts. Ecology is derived from the Greek term, oikeo, which means “to inhabit.” So to call these encounters “ecological” suggests their potential to help human beings understand themselves as part of a habitat. These

\textsuperscript{3} In this paper, for simplicity’s sake, I frequently use the term “nature” to describe non-human species, when seeking to describe how humans relate to, and are interconnected with, but are not the same as, other species. The relationship and distinction between humans and other species is a complex philosophical and moral question. The question of what constitutes “nature” (for example, does nature include the “built environment”?) is similarly complex. While these questions rightly trouble simplistic references to nature, and they both are related to the epistemological question at the heart of this paper, detailed attention to these argument are outside the purview of these pages.

encounters are the beginning and a summons to inhabitance, a lifelong process of learning to live well in the world.

**Ecological Encounters and Environmental Education**

In 1956, Rachel Carson published her landmark essay, “Help Your Child to Wonder.” Although surely not the first to raise the question of how to cultivate ecological awareness, Carson’s essay is often cited as a catalyst for the emergence of the field of environmental education. Codified in documents like the Belgrade Charter (1972) and the Tbilisi Declaration (1977), environmental education aims to:

1. to foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
2. to provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
3. to create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole towards the environment.\(^5\)

Environmental education thus conceived begins with a solid foundation of scientific knowledge and issues in ethical action. Would that our contemporary political discourse valued these two goals! If we understand “encounter” to be an educational and transformative moment, however, do these goals account for the kind of education borne and prompted by the ecological encounters experienced by Wendell Berry, bell hooks, or anyone who has ever sought to know and love a place? Do these goals adequately describe what happens in ecological encounters? Do they describe a pedagogy up to the task of nurturing persons with the affective and imaginative capacities for leaning fully into such ecological encounters, with an openness to being affected, personally, by them?

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David Orr would argue, emphatically, “no.” Our recent efforts in environmental education have yielded little in the way of an ecologically-sensitive and committed public. While the inclusion of environmental education emphases in public and higher education may net a wider segment of the population who know more about the environment, they do not necessarily demonstrate thoroughgoing ecological literacy, which is “driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world. ...(Ecological literacy) is not just a comprehension of how the world works, but, in the light of that knowledge, a life lived accordingly.”

Orr worries that our efforts at environmental education have failed to ameliorate a discouragingly persistent population of provocatively-named “ecological yahoos without a clue about why the color of the water in their rivers is related to their food supply, or why storms are becoming more severe as the climate is unbalanced.” Given the inclusion over the last three decades of environmental science and education in public schools, colleges and universities, and more informal educational settings like religious communities and organizations, where is the disconnect?

Educators who are interested in cultivating ecological literacy are thus confronted with a fundamentally epistemological question: What kind of knowing constitutes ecological knowing? If we allow for it, the kinds of encounters described by hooks and Berry challenge not only what we know about the world, but how we know the world. Scholars in ecotheology, environmental ethics, and educational theory must take on the philosophical question of what it means to know, ecologically, before we can address the pedagogical question of how this kind of knowing is cultivated.

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7 Orr, 252.
Toward an Ecological Epistemology

Some attribute the rather disappointing environmental education outcomes (that generation of “ecological yahoos”) to a perhaps unspoken investment in the old aphorism, “those who know better, do better.” Indeed, the Tbilisi Declaration, above, perhaps implies this assumption in its very first goal: “to foster awareness and concern.” Many ecological education programs turn on this assumption: Once we learn about the environment, we are inspired to be better caretakers of it. In such a formulation, learning is the cognitive act of acquiring data, interpreting it, and developing rational and creative responses to that knowledge.\(^8\)

The theory of knowledge influencing these pedagogical models can be traced to the emergence of the scientific method and the philosophical values of the Enlightenment. The codification of rational modes of inquiry, ostensibly freed from the influence of religion or superstition, made possible remarkable leaps in scientific, historical, and philosophical understanding.\(^9\) These methods of inquiry have become what ecofeminist philosopher Lorraine Code has described as the dominant, orthodox model of epistemology, which is guided by a formal conception of knowledge, it works to determine standards for justifying claims to know and for distinguishing bona fide knowledge from belief or conjecture, to establish criteria ubiquitously valid across epistemic domains, thus neither deriving from nor dependent upon certain ways of knowing, the capacities of particular knowers, the particularities of epistemic location, or the purposes of specific epistemic projects. ...(Such epistemologies) presuppose an autonomous, rational, adult, individual knower who is everyone and no one, but whose identity is epistemologically irrelevant.\(^10\)

In what follows, I trace the development of an ecological epistemology, first exploring ecofeminist critiques of an over-reliance on empirical understanding and then introducing

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\(^8\) This is the premise of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of learning.
\(^10\) Code, 130-31.
“situated knowledges,” which privilege particularity, affective knowing, and embodied experience.

**Rationalist, Instrumentalist Epistemology**

Recent eco-feminist scholarship, of which Code is an exemplar, has challenged some core epistemological assumptions that have persisted even in formulations of ecological knowing, such as the application of universal criteria and a knower freed from bias and subjectivity. In orthodox epistemologies, the autonomous, rationalist individual thinker has triumphed over mythological, emotional, and socially-established knowing. Ecological contexts, like anything else, can be known best through dispassionate inquiry, guided by universal norms and yielding generalizable knowledge. This epistemological framework might be traced back to Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, who held that the most intellectually defensible and moral perspective is disinterested and founded upon reason, rather than emotion. Hence, the orthodox epistemology: “(T)he familiar view of reason and emotion as sharply separated and opposed, and of ‘desire,’ caring, and love as merely ‘personal’ and ‘particular’ as opposed to the universality and impartiality of understanding, and of ‘feminine’ emotions as essentially unreliable, untrustworthy, and morally irrelevant, an inferior domain to be dominated by a superior, disinterested (and of course masculine) reason.”¹¹ Certainly, in a political context now described as “post-fact” or “post-truth,” in which political figures repeat with impunity purported “facts” that are demonstrably false, in which what persons “feel” is true matters more than what is measurably true, empirical

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evidence and reason are as needed as ever. Feminist biology and philosophy scholar Donna Haraway cautions against the impulse to dispatch with objectivity altogether, arguing that we need “enforceable, reliable accounts” of reality. Researchers go too far, however, when they treat the “object” of inquiry as “a passive and inert thing,” failing to encounter it as an actor and agent. It is in this process of objectification that empirical inquiry has the potential to control and constrain the production of knowledge. An epistemological system so preoccupied with control and verification leaves little room for being changed in the pursuit of understanding. Code describes epistemologies that fixate on accumulating, classifying, and ordering data (“knowing that”) as epistemologies of “mastery”: “(W)here a dislocated knower-as-spectator seeks to predict, manipulate, and control the behavior of the material world and of other ‘less enlightened’ people.”

Paired with the logic of mastery is what Carolyn Merchant describes as “the instrumentalization of nature.” Whereas up to the around the sixteenth century, “the metaphor binding together the self, society, and the cosmos was that of an organism,” the scientific revolution and Enlightenment thinking replaced the image of an organism with an image of disorder, to be subdued by a (rationally-designed) machine. This shift in metaphors bore epistemological consequences: Francis Bacon, for example, understood nature as a “womb” holding truths which science and technology could wrest and dissect. It is language of control, of extraction, and exploitation. Merchant draws together some of

12 Code, herself, noted Rachel Carson’s deep respect for and use of empirical, observational science. Code, 38.
14 Haraway, 592. Haraway suggests that we need not lose the language of “object” in scientific inquiry. In the rest of this paper, however, I continue to use the language of subject-subject encounter to describe ecological epistemology, but understand my argument to be in the same spirit as Haraway’s.
15 Code, 8.
Bacon’s strongest language: “Nature must be ‘bound into service’ and made a ‘slave,’ put ‘in constraint’ and ‘molded’ by the mechanical arts.” At worst, this instrumentalization of nature makes it a powerless object whose worth is determined according to its utility to human purposes, in the interest of which all manner of extraction, exploitation, and destruction are justified. In even a mild form, instrumentalist epistemologies reduce nature to a storehouse of resources to be stewarded and conserved for future (human) generations. In neither case is nature understood as a subject with the power to influence, affect, or alter those who encounter it.

In its distanced rationalism and utilitarian instrumentalism, the orthodox epistemological framework reveals its impoverishment when we try to account for an ecological encounter. How might we characterize the kind of knowledge nurtured in Berry’s human to humus encounter? He learns about this Kentucky place by getting up close, by resting his body upon the soil, and by relating to it. It is as if he understands himself to be addressed by this land, as it makes its “dark proposal” known. Ecological encounters necessarily disrupt the narrative of knowledge as mastery. Threads of mystery are woven through ecological encounters. Mystery cannot be fully known, and even less known from an impartial distance.

Despite the indispensability of empirical and observational science toward ecological understanding, ecological knowing cannot be reduced to the collection, ordering, and application of verifiable data, particularly if the telos of ecological knowing is love and commitment to the planet. Our ecological thinking, however, has not fundamentally disrupted the dominant model of epistemology in much of Western philosophy and ethics.

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17 Merchant, 281.
18 Schweitzer, 37.
This simply will not do, Code argues: "(Ecological) knowledge is not primarily propositional; and even though empirical ‘facts’ are integral to it, it does not reduce to ‘S-knows-that-p’ propositions. Even \(\textit{per impossibile}\) knowing all such facts about another person might not warrant claiming to know her."\(^{19}\) An epistemological revolution is thus in order.\(^{20}\)

\textit{Ecological Epistemology}

Code’s invocation of a human relationship is instructive for efforts to re-imagine an epistemological framework for ecological encounters and their implications for ecological consciousness. For if the phenomenon in question involves a subject (human) encountering another subject (nature), the resultant understanding is far deeper than propositional knowledge. It comes to the knower via embodied, affective, and deeply situated means. These means of knowing have been disregarded and considered suspicious sources of insight in the dominant, rationalist epistemological framework, but an ecological epistemological framework recognizes the values of these ways of knowing for cultivating both ecological and social understanding and commitment.

Importantly, “ecological thinking is not simply thinking \textit{about} ecology or the environment… it is a revisioned mode of engagement with knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship, and agency that pervades and reconfigures theory and practice.”\(^{21}\) It relocates inquiry “down on the ground,” taking as its starting point the ecological situations and interconnections of the knower and knowing. This epistemic

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\(^{19}\) Code, 49.

\(^{20}\) Code, 3.

\(^{21}\) Code, 5.
relocation has the potential, Code hopes, “to produce habitats where people can live well
together and respectfully with and within the physical/natural world.”

Whereas the
dominant rationalist and instrumentalist epistemology emphasizes mastery and order,
even as it seeks to think about the environment, an ecological epistemology emphasizes a
search for connections and particularities, in the interest of a better way of inhabiting the
world. It is thinking from within, as a member of, the ecological context.

In the bracingly embodied and affective practice of imagination described at the
outset of this essay, Wendell Berry profoundly understands himself to be an inhabitant,
deeply connected to and in a particular place. He arises from and returns to an elemental
matrix of life. Locating human living and dying in its ecological context, Berry paints a
tender portrait of human life as inhabitation. The path toward inhabitance begins with a
response to the claim that humans are ecological beings – situated in their ecological and
social contexts. Recall from the beginning of this essay that “ecology” is derived from the
verb that means, “to inhabit.” Ecological thinking, then, literally might be described as “the
knowledge (logos) of inhabiting.” Inhabitance as a pedagogical context and goal is
described below. Here, however, we pause to consider the qualities of epistemological
knowing that give rise to a posture and practice of inhabitance. Such knowing is situated,
embodied, and affective.

22 Code, 19.
23 Code, 7, 9, 279-80.
24 Contrast this sense with the study of environment, a term derived from the French term “virer” (viron),
which means to encircle. An environ is that which encircles or surrounds. While it is not necessarily the case
that considering the environment as “surroundings” leads us to distance ourselves from it and fail to
appreciate the relationship that connects us to it, the etymological distinction might be instructive. See Gillian
Judson, A New Approach to Ecological Education: Engaging Students’ Imaginations in Their World (New York:
**Situated Knowing.** As described above, the dominant rationalist epistemological framework assumes that pure knowledge is universal and transcends the particular. Best not let pure reason be clouded by the messiness, confusion, and concern of the everyday! Feminist philosophers and theologians, however, have questioned both the plausibility and the desirability of these epistemological assumptions. Donna Haraway, for example, has described feminist ways of knowing as “situated.” Inquiry should be guided by “embodied vision,” she insists, thus reclaiming “the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere.”\(^{25}\) The latter she coins, “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere.”\(^{26}\)

Indeed, the illusion of transcendent understanding, from an unacknowledged and purportedly disembodied location on high, is a threat to true knowledge: “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. ...The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular ...(understanding is not the product) of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position.”\(^{27}\) Put more simply, the principle of situated knowledges rejects the possibility that we might, on our own, know all there is to know about another subject, thus pressing us into collaborative interpretation and understanding.\(^{28}\) The particularities of the knower, her experience, her values and emotional commitments, her community of knowing, as well as the particularities of her

\(^{25}\) Haraway, 581.
\(^{26}\) Haraway, 581.
\(^{27}\) Haraway, 583, 90.
\(^{28}\) In fact, Haraway argues that the unknowability of another is a product of the world’s “elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view.” Haraway, 583. Parker Palmer would add that it is only in community, each bringing to bear their partial understanding, that we can know the truth. Parker Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1993), 55-57.
context which she seeks to know, all influence how she understands what she sees, and how she acts responsibly with that knowledge. When knowledge is situated, even a shared objective such as “living well together” might be met in different ways in different places, and thus is a “multiply realizable end.”

*Embodied Knowing.* Knowing is first situated in the senses. Despite Haraway’s call to embodied vision and embodied objectivity, however, empirical inquiry has considered embodied knowing to be suspect: “(Feminist scientists) are the embodied others, who are not allowed to *not* have a body, a finite point of view, and so an inevitably disqualifying and polluting bias in any discussion of consequence outside our own little circles.” The association of gender and embodiment is an example of a philosophical dualism. Ecofeminists have documented well the system of dualisms, and their hierarchical arrangement, that has plagued philosophical assumptions even as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Dualisms simplistically categorize and order mind over body, reason over emotion, human (man) over nature: “This nature is subordinated to man; woman to man… Feminists have long criticized this dichotomy, particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen as analogous to that of man and woman.” Thus, the “natural” ordering and subordination of emotion, “brute matter,” bodies, nature, and women in the search for knowledge. Ecological knowing, however, is evoked in the body, by sensory experience: “The ecological subject, then, is materially situated: Embodied location and

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29 Code, 25.
30 Haraway, 575.
32 Ruether, 27.
interdependence are integral to its possibilities for knowledge and action.”\textsuperscript{33} Certainly, Berry and hooks’ encounters and subsequent knowledge would hardly be possible if not for the sensory insights proffered by their lungs, their hands, their eyes.

Christian theological traditions have struggled to make sense of and determine the trustworthiness of sensory experience. Mystics use evocative sensory language to describe experiences of ecstasy and desolation.\textsuperscript{34} But even larger-than-life representatives of orthodoxy Despite all of his neo-platonist suspicion of the body and the passions, even Saint Augustine reached for sensory language to describe a divine encounter and spiritual knowledge:

\begin{quote}
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;  
You flared, blazed, banished my blindness;  
You lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you;  
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;  
You touched me, and I burned for your peace.\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Of course, Augustine, having dispatched with the senses earlier in Book 10 of the confessions, is likely speaking metaphorically about the sensory character of spiritual insight. Nonetheless, it is the language of the senses that best communicates the profound knowing that he seeks to describe. Others, however, speak quite literally about the role of the senses. In a recent sermon, for example, Presbyterian minister Mamie Broadhurst described the power of sensory experience in her theological and emotional understanding of the August 2017 solar eclipse:

\begin{quote}
I was still completely unprepared for how I felt, for one and a half minutes, three weeks ago. ...when the inevitable and completely logical and understandable darkness fell, I gasped! People around me screamed! They didn’t scream like scared screams, they just let out the bigness that couldn’t fit inside them anymore. I felt like my breath or my heart was too big for my body. And at the same time that somehow my body was expanding to curve around the awe and wonder that was exploding inside of me with a sort of ravenous joy. I felt part of something really, really big. And at the same time, I felt
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} Code, 91.  
\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, St. John of the Cross’ \textit{Dark Night of the Soul} and Teresa of Avila’s \textit{Interior Castle}.  
really, really small. I could then, and I can, now, tell you all of the mechanics of the eclipse. But none of that explains my experience of the eclipse. On August 21, I was awed by science, and by a sense of profound connection to God and to creation. And the two worked together to bring about my gasp of wonder.”

Embodied, sensory, and experiential encounters are important sources of insight. Research on the relationship between memory and the senses demonstrates this phenomenon. A song, a scent, a taste can immediately and surprisingly elicit a powerful memory and its associated emotional responses.

Affective Knowing. Rachel Carson wrote “Help Your Child to Wonder” after spending a summer on the coast of Maine with her toddler nephew. The conservation biologist was struck by the emotional character of the boy’s ecological learning, sparked by his sensory encounter with the wildlife of the rugged coastline: “‘(I)t is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.” Many educators have assumed that engaging children’s bodies and emotions are necessary pedagogical strategies for ecologically educating children. Philosophical ethics and moral development theory, however, have tended to present embodied and emotional learning as stages that humans “grow out of,” accommodations not needed by fully developed adults. Carson, however, believed that the cultivation of wonder, for example, was perhaps even more necessary for adults, “an unfailing antidote against the boredom

and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength."\footnote{Published in 1956, Rachel Carson’s prescient essay, later republished as \textit{The Sense of Wonder}, describes in evocative terms the cultivation of wonder in children, identifying the ways in which wonder works among adults, even scientists, too. Rachel Carson, "Help Your Child to Wonder," \textit{Women’s Home Companion}, July 1956, 46.}

And yet dualistic thinking that subordinates the emotions to reason persists. David Orr, for example, worries that we have come to distrust human emotion as a catalyst for learning: “Why is it so hard to talk about love, the most powerful of human emotions, in relation to science, the most powerful and far-reaching of human activities? ...Perhaps it is only embarrassment about what does or does not move us personally.”\footnote{David W. Orr, "Love," in \textit{Hope Is an Imperative: The Essential David Orr} (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2011), 31.} Val Plumwood laments that even environmental ethics has employed dichotomous dualisms in its defense of biocentrism. In a critique of Paul Taylor’s \textit{Respect for Nature}, for example, Plumwood writes that Taylor embeds his argument in a “Kantian ethical framework that makes strong use of the reason/emotion dichotomy. Thus we are assured that the attitude of respect is the moral one because it is universalizing and disinterested.”\footnote{Plumwood, 292.}

The critiques of key theories of cognitive and moral development (Piaget and Kohlberg, for example) are now well established: These theories often assumed a “universal” or “generic” knower or moral agent who had transcended embodied and emotional stages of development. But the assumptions upon which these theories were based often reflected a cultural, gender, or racial bias. Kohlberg, for example, considered moral responses based on care and relationship (culturally and traditionally associated with women’s moral reasoning), to be morally less mature than moral responses based on universal concepts of justice. Similarly, Kohlberg considered moral responses based on
social or community values (often associated with non-Western moral reasoning) to be morally less mature than moral responses based on individual reason.41

And yet, why not consider capacities for emotional and relational maturity and sensitivity to be moral resources? Code turns to Gilles Deleuze, among others, to describe the affective and relational capacities necessary to live well in a place. We need an ethos in which “the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing” are nurtured.42 Human conceptions of interdependence, and consciousness of being members of a shared household, require more than rational assent. It requires the openness and willingness to affect and to be affected: “Concern for nature, then, should not be viewed as the completion of a process of (masculine) universalization, moral abstraction, and disconnection, discarding the self, emotions, and special ties (all, of course, associated with the private sphere and femininity).”43

This extended reflection on epistemological assumptions, labyrinthine as it is, has real and material consequences for education, particularly religious and theological education. Both epistemological frameworks inform approaches to ecological learning. Indeed, both are necessary, to some degree, for ecological learning. An ecological epistemological approach, however, privileges the particular, the variable, the bodies and the affections of the learner, and the communities of commitment needed to live well in our world. Such learning and learners are necessary for the future of the planet. Ecological

42 Lorraine Code employs Deleuze’s concept of ethos to account for the role of the affections in ecological thinking. See Code, 26.
43 Plumwood, 295.
knowing, however, in its emphasis on affections, relationship, and honoring the mystery of the other, informs more than the human-nature relationship. It informs how we relate to other human beings, as well. In the logic of mastery, Code warns, the habit of classifying and ordering data risks classifying and ordering persons, communities, and cultures, too: “These issues (associated with epistemologies of mastery) translate, by analogy, into practices of classifying people by race, gender, physical ability, age, and so on, with comparable tendencies to reify, solidify, into stereotyped identities.”

Ecological thinking, in contrast, has the potential to transform how we know in both its micropractices of attentiveness and its macropractices of critical and constructive engagement. We learn how to think ecologically as we learn how to be inhabitants.

**Ecological Encounter and Learning Inhabitance**

If the desired outcome for religious ecological education is persons who know how to love and tend a place, persons who understand themselves as part of and responsible for the world, persons who deeply desire to live well in a place, then “mastery” is at best an insufficient metaphor for conceiving understanding. At worst, it will even work against the purposes of real ecological understanding.

Of course, scholars in religious education have long wondered about the effectiveness of rationalist approaches to religious learning. Parker Palmer, for example, has argued that education has too long relied solely on the “eye of the mind,” which employs fact and reason, whereas spiritual traditions have the capacity to nurture the “eye

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44 Code, 50.
45 Code, 31.
of heart,” which sees “a world warmed and transformed by the power of love.”\textsuperscript{46} With the eye of the mind and the eye of the heart, humans might have “wholesight,” whereby understanding and responsibility are nurtured: “(A) knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability.”\textsuperscript{47} Palmer’s compelling case for love as not only the end of knowledge, but also its origin, challenges dominant epistemologies of mastery and instrumentalization. True knowledge is communal and committed.

Concurrently, scholars in ecological education similarly have been arguing that approaches that fail to engage human affections, bodies, and imaginations necessarily lack the capacity to nurture ecological ways of \textit{being} in the world.\textsuperscript{48} In other words, what is needed is attention to the relationship between human feeling, human physicality, human knowing, and human situatedness in ecological context. What is needed is a reimagining and re-education of the human being as inhabitant. As noted in the outset of this paper, inhabitance is an unfolding process of learning, self-discovery, and commitment. It is a process of epistemological, pedagogical, and theological significance.

Inhabitance is an art. Learning inhabitance summons human beings’ deepest resources of moral wisdom, affection, and creativity. While one might understand her surroundings with usable knowledge, this does not an inhabitant make. Nothing about this kind of knowledge is necessarily false or mistaken, but technical knowledge holds the thing

\textsuperscript{46} Palmer, xxiii.
\textsuperscript{47} Palmer, 9.
to be known at an objective distance, so that we can *use* the knowledge gained in some way. It relies on a rationalist, instrumentalist way of knowing. Seeking this kind of instrumental knowledge does not elicit any moral obligation or emotional relationship to the thing known. Sallie McFague would describe this way of seeing and knowing the world as the “arrogant eye.”^{49} It is to employ the faculty of vision as a means of holding the thing to be known at a distance, as an all-seeing transcendent knower.^{50}

In contrast, to see and know the world with a “loving eye” is to inhabit it with the desire to belong to it. It requires a reorientation of human identity and life, a remembering of who we are as ecological beings. It is a kind of resurrection, a discovery of new life in connection with the earth: “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”^{51} The way of inhabitance is an immersion into this mystery with courage and curiosity. To love the world in this way is to honor its mystery, its unknowability, its “other-ness,” while at the same time knowing profoundly our embeddedness within it. It is an invitation to seek to know the world ever more intimately.

Being transformed as inhabitants is thus, perhaps, the paradigmatic ecological vocation. Ecological religious education that cultivates inhabitance turns on ecological epistemologies, ways of knowing that embrace mystery and interdependence, emotion and somatic understanding. Ways of knowing that are loving, rather than distancing. Ways of knowing that help us to live well, together, in the world.

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^{50} Haraway, 580.


